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HOOKS OF STEEL

BY

HELEN PROTHERO-LEWIS

AUTHOR OF

"A LADY OF MY OWN," "HER HEART'S DESIRE," &c.

"The friends thou hast, and their adoption tried,
Grapple them to thy soul with Hooks of Steel."
—SHAKSPERE.

IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. III

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HOOKS OF STEEL.

Book IV.

CHAPTER IV.

HE stopped when he saw us, stopped dead short on the pavement amidst all the hurrying people. And as he looked at me and D'Arcy, his face changed and grew drawn and old with sharp, sudden misery. I had pierced him to the heart; in his face I saw it. Sick and cold with shame, scarce knowing what I did, I shrank back in the hansom. Only for a moment, but it was a fatal moment.

“Yes, that's right, keep back, hide, I'll protect you!” called out D'Arcy to me loudly, so loudly Felix could not fail to hear. Then placing one hand familiarly on my shoulder, he opened the

trap-door again with his cane and shouted—"off!"

Without an instant's pause the driver whipped up his horse and was off as hard as he could go.

I recovered myself when I found I was being borne away from Felix.

"Stop!" I cried wildly, swinging back the doors in front of me, "let me get out. I must go back! I must go back to Felix!"

D'Arcy leaned forward and hastily swung the doors together again.

"You can never go back to Felix," he said, seizing me and holding me firmly down in my seat. "You will have to stay with me instead. Felix would not have you now. He has caught you here in London alone with me; *he has found you out.*"

Appalled by his words and manner, I turned upon him. His face was still full of malignant triumph, his small dark eyes burnt as they gazed into mine, his lips were drawn back from his big

white teeth in a wide grin. It was a full revelation this time. I knew him as he was; loathsomely, horribly ugly and wicked.

“You are a fiend!” I cried. “I know you now. You arranged it all. You deliberately took me where you knew Felix would see me. It was a vile plot. I see it all, and I hate you, I hate you! Do not dare to touch me. Take your hands off. Let me get out and leave you this instant.”

But D’Arcy only held me down more tightly. I dashed my hand upwards through the opening in the roof and called to the driver to stop. “No use,” said D’Arcy. “The man is in my pay. You may as well sit quiet, Rosamund. I shall be very kind, you have nothing to fear.”

Nearly frantic, I called to a passer-by to help me. Then D’Arcy shouted to the driver to let down the glass, and I found myself more straitly imprisoned than ever. By this time we had left the Strand far behind us, and were dashing up

quiet side streets, but in what direction I knew not. It was like a horrible nightmare: on and on we went, and each step took me more hopelessly away from Felix. In vain did I struggle, in vain did I cry to be set down. The driver took no notice of my cries, and D'Arcy, still with that horrible grin on his face, said never another word, only held me back tightly in the hansom. I cannot say how long that terrible drive lasted. My mind throughout was a chaos of horror and despair.

At last, after long hours as it seemed to me, the hansom stopped, and D'Arcy called to the man to open the window. We were in the middle of a broad path bordered with trees, and all around us was silent dreary park-land. A drizzle of rain had begun, and beneath the trees it was already dark with the fast gathering shades of a winter evening. Here D'Arcy loosened his hold of me, and instantly I got out. Where to

go and what to do next I knew not, so stood helplessly in the rain. D'Arcy sat looking at me for a moment, as if thinking, then got out also.

"There is the sovereign," he said, handing up some money to the driver. The man took it, glanced at me, and hesitated.

"You can go," said D'Arcy sharply.

"And leave the young lady in the rain?"

"Did you hear? You can go," repeated D'Arcy, still more sharply. The man drove away. I felt too stunned to make any appeal to him. Besides of what use? Was it not he who had driven me on and on, in spite of my cries, until now miles and miles of unknown streets lay between me and Felix. If I had been in the middle of a wilderness, and Felix the other side of the world, he could not have felt more lost to me than he did at that moment.

"Now, Rosamund," said D'Arcy, turning to me and speaking very determinedly, "listen to

reason and be a sensible girl. *You have lost Felix.* You are not so mad, I suppose, as to imagine he will have anything further to do with you after this. You lead a miserable life at the castle, and it will be still more miserable to go back there now, for Felix will never visit you any more. Neither will I come there after you again. I have had enough of it, I want something better. So if you go back, you go back to be absolutely alone with a madman and his keeper. Mark my words: your uncle is not, and never will be cured. At his best, he's as mad as a hatter. And he's liable to these attacks of violent madness which make him absolutely dangerous. Matthew keeps it dark, but it is not the first time your uncle has had to go to the asylum by any means. He'll break out again as sure as my name is Leigh, perhaps next time without any warning. That happened once, so may well happen again. There's no method in his madness:

a thoroughly unreliable madman, my friend on the common calls him. So that's the companion you will go home to.

"Now I have it in my power to offer you a very happy life. I love you, and I want you to be my wife. You are just fitted for a London life, and with your beauty and originality might make a perfect furore. Now, will you accept what I offer you and marry me? You have only to say 'yes,' and I will take you straight to my sister who will act as chaperon until we can be married: She is a good-natured girl, and will be glad to oblige me, for many reasons. Now say, will you marry me? I'll be awfully kind to you, Rosamund. After all, you'd have had a slow time of it with that impecunious Felix."

I had been listening in a dull, stunned way to this speech, but at his last words an hysterical passion of anger awoke within me.

"Marry you! Never! I would rather die," I cried. "I know you at last for what you are, a wicked, plotting fiend!"

"Now, now! No nonsense," said D'Arcy angrily. "Remember, Rosamund, you are very much in my power. You don't know where you are, night is coming on, it is raining faster every minute, and you can't find your way out of this place, or get a cab, without me. So give me a kind answer, and let me take you off to my sister's. Come, child, don't be foolish, we can't stand here an hour, getting drenched. Be nice, I've loved you a long time, and been your most devoted slave, I am sure. Give me a kiss, and say you'll come."

"Never! Keep off! How dare you?" I cried, trembling with mingled fear and anger.

"You needn't be so very particular. I'll be bound you've kissed Felix hundreds of times."

"Felix! Yes. But you—you!!" Words failed

me. I could find none that would express my detestation of him.

He pressed closer, as if determined to kiss me. Then my passion grew beyond my control. I seized the cane he was holding in his hand, and struck him smartly across the face with it. Then I flung the hateful thing from me amidst the trees.

“There!” I cried. “That is to show you how I loathe and detest you now. Go and pick up your cane, the cane you used to help you in your plotting. You have wrecked my life. You have ruined Felix’s. You have persuaded me to deceive, and dragged me down to misery. Go, and never let me see your wicked face again.”

D’Arcy made for an instant as if he were going to strike me in return, but he restrained himself. “All right,” he said, in a voice trembling with suppressed rage. “All right, young lady. You have given me my *congé*, and I’ll take it. I don’t feel so anxious to make you

my wife as I did a moment ago. I'd best not saddle myself with a vixen. I'll leave you, to find your way back to the castle. I hope you will enjoy yourself when you get there."

Then, without another word, he strode away and left me alone in that strange place in the rain.

I waited until he had disappeared in the darkness, then turned and walked in exactly the opposite direction, neither thinking nor caring where I was going, so dulled was I with misery. But the road went on, and seemed as if it would never end, and at length I stopped, chilled, wet, and weary. Then suddenly it occurred to me that I ought to try and get home; there was just a faint chance that Felix might go down to ask what it all meant. At the thought that he might arrive at the castle, find me still absent, and imagine me still with D'Arcy, I began to burn with fever. I turned, and ne'er through

an arch so hurried the blown tide, as I through the rain and the dark did hurry then. Thinking it would now be best I followed the direction D'Arcy had taken, and after a time came to some big iron gates. Just as I passed through them a hansom came driving towards me. My first impulse was to accost the driver, but I pulled myself up just when about to speak, for by the flickering light of the gas-lamp on the gate I saw it was the man who had driven me away from Felix. With my head down I hurried past him.

"Missy! Missy!" called the man as I passed. I made no answer. He turned and drove after me, walking the horse by my side as I pressed on in the rain. "Missy! Listen. I'm a poor man with a large family, and that gent is a well-known fare of mine so I did not like to go against him. But I didn't half like the job. It went against my conscience a bit, it did, seeing you

so unwilling inside. After I left you, when I'd got well away, who should I see but the gent dashing round a corner in another hansom, with a bad sort of look on him, and, dashed if I could go on, for thinking of the helpless looking young thing I left with him in the rain. So back I came again, just to see what had become of you. And now, Missy, if I can make up to you by driving you anywhere, say the word and jump in, and there you shall go."

So lost and wretched did I feel, and so consuming was my desire to get home, I could not refuse the offer. The man helped to bring about my misery, but, if I sent him away now, where should I go, what should I do, in this great unknown city? I climbed in, feeling utterly spent.

"Where to?" asked the man, peering down through the now horribly familiar trap-door.

"Oh, take me home, take me home!" I half moaned in answer.

"Yes, Missy, don't you fret, I'll take you home. But where is it?"

"On Wildacre Common."

"Phew! That's a long way off. I can't drive you to Wildacre, but I'll drive you to Waterloo, and you'll get a train there easy that'll take you straight to Wildacre."

He flicked his whip and started. I do not know what streets we passed through, but again I seemed to drive through miles and miles of them. The rain poured down upon the pavements, which shone in murky glossiness beneath the gas-lamps. The people flitted past like black ghosts, beneath the shade of their dripping umbrellas. This was the gay city, the city of my dreams. I had envied Felix his life in this city; I had risked my life's happiness to spend one day in it. And, behold! its pleasures had turned to ashes in my mouth, and its light into horrible murky darkness. It was a miserable city, a terrible city, a

city that made one feel fearfully, utterly alone.

We reached Waterloo at last, and my driver called a porter and asked him to attend to me. Then he drove off instantly, and not until afterwards did I remember that he had gone without even asking for his fare. The porter escorted me to the right platform, but there we found a train to Wildacre had just gone, and there would be no other for thirty-five minutes. I sat down in my wet things upon a bench, and waited with feverish impatience, whilst the clock overhead lagged through the interminable minutes. Then what D'Arcy had said came true. Strange horrible men came up and spoke to me. I sat mute, and answered never a word, and my heart sickened with longing for Felix. The porter came for me when the time was up, and put me into the train, and smiled gratefully at me when I gave him half-a-crown. All through the journey to Wildacre I sat in a kind of stupor,

only waking from it when people got in and out at the stations, or when a train whizzed past on its way up to London. Then came the drive up the hill and across the common. It was very cold on the common. The rain had now ceased to fall, and the wind cut my face like a knife, but I was too weary to pull up the cab windows. By the little sunken fence I dismissed the cab, and walked in the darkness across the lawn to the honeysuckle porch. A flood of light greeted me as I opened the door, and Anne Gillotson rushed out of the dining-room looking white and agitated.

“ Oh! I *am* glad to see you safely back again, Miss,” she said. “ It is going on for ten o’clock, and I have been so anxious about you ever since it became dark. Mr. Felix Gray has been here. He arrived about nine o’clock, but when he found you were out he did not stay.”

I stood still in the hall, and a deadly sick

feeling came over me. "Did he ask where I was?" I managed to say.

"Yes, Miss. Oh, please don't look like that," replied Anne, almost weeping. "I hope you'll forgive me, but he was so stern and asked such sharp questions I was obliged to tell him."

"You told him——?"

"I told him that you had said you were going to spend the day with an old schoolfellow who was staying near here."

"And then?"

"Oh, dear! Miss, I am more vexed than I can say that it should have happened, for he looked in a dreadful way and went straight out at the door. I begged him to wait, but he said there would be no use in waiting. Then he changed his mind and came in again, and said he'd leave a note for you. I got him pen and paper and he wrote a short note. 'Give her this,' he said, 'when she returns, if she ever does

return.' Then he went away. He has not been gone half an hour, Miss, if you'd only been a little bit earlier you'd have caught him. My dear, how wet you are, and how white you look; what does it all mean?"

"Where is the note?" I gasped.

She went into the dining-room and brought it out to me. I tore it open. There were but two words written on the paper:

"Good-bye, Rosamund."

This was the end. Upon me had been laid the punishing hand of God.

CHAPTER V.

NOT Ariadne passioning for Theseus' flight ever felt such grief as mine was then. Felix must have gone back to town in one of the trains that whizzed past mine as I made the dreadful journey home. I had lost my last chance by missing that earlier train at Waterloo. Thirty-five minutes earlier, and we should not have whizzed past each other in silent misery, and I might have been saved. If only I could have seen him! I should have thrown myself upon his bosom, and clung to him and entreated him. I should have poured out to him the whole story of my wickedness and my sorrow, have forced him to believe

in my remorse and my love. I would have held him fast and never let him go. And he who loved me so much, seeing my misery, seeing my real love, would have been unable to tear himself away. But now, he had gone, he had said good-bye, and all was over. I staggered where I stood, and the frightened dressmaker came over to me and supported me. There was no strength left in me any more. She led me upstairs, and took off my wet things, and put me to bed like a baby.

Mute and unresisting I let her do as she would with me. Then she fetched the charwoman to light my fire, and they whispered together, and through my chilled stupor I could feel both were full of deep concern. They brought me some hot drink later on, and I drank it after they had implored me long, drank it just to be left in peace.

All through the night I lay there, cold, quiet,

stupid. There had come upon me a frost, a killing frost, and dead were the tender leaves of hope. Sleep fled far away, and left me a watcher of mine own heart's sorrow. My bright day was done. I was for the dark; and no glimpse was given to me, as to Charmian, of the far-off break in the clouds, and the eastern star.

Never once during the miserable Sunday that followed that endless night did I leave the house. I feared lest by some chance Felix might come back and find me again absent. All the day long I watched from the window, straining my eyes across the wide common even after light had waned. Vain effort! No dark figure came towards me, such as I had seen many a time before when waiting eagerly for Felix.

A second night. Again no sleep came near me. I think I was touched with madness that second night. Whenever I closed my eyes I

saw the wide dreary common, and far away a dark figure which came on and on, yet never drew nearer. On the Monday, although I knew it would be a fruitless watch, I again set myself to stare out of the window across the common. When the luncheon hour approached Anne came and forcibly drew me away.

“Miss Gwynne,” she said, “I really must not allow you to go on like this any longer. You will have a serious illness. Will you not tell me what is wrong? Do, dear child; in some way I might be able to help. When we are in trouble we never know from what quarter help may come. Tell me, tell me, dear!”

“I have lost Felix,” I said, breaking down suddenly into wild sobs. “I have lost Felix. He has said good-bye to me. He will never come back to me again.”

“Oh! my dear, I hope it is not so bad as that.”

“Hope! There is no hope. I have been guilty of a base and cruel sin, and this is my punishment. God is punishing me: there is no hope when He punishes.”

“Oh, my dear! don’t say that. I think there is more hope than when man does. Let us try to do something better for you than staring out of that window. Can’t we go after Mr. Felix? He’s so fond of you I am sure if he could see your poor changed face he’d forgive you anything!”

Could there yet be hope? Oh, Eastern Star! are you there, behind the clouds? My heart beat wildly at the thought.

“Oh, yes! let us do that, let us go at once after Felix,” I cried, a fever of impatience rising within me, and taking the place of the cold numbness which had possessed me before.

“Very well,” said Anne, “we will go, but not until you have eaten a solid luncheon. I will take no step from here until you have done that.”

I saw by her face she was determined, so followed her into the dining-room. So deep a horror did I now feel of the great city, I had not the courage to start off by myself. I forced some solid food down my throat, the barouche was ordered, and in half an hour we were on the weary way to London. It was half past two when we reached Waterloo. Two days ago the place had breathed to me of pleasant anticipation, now it was full of distressing associations. The bench against the wall wore a terrible look of familiarity, so did the loungers who stared at me on the wide platform. The face of the clock was as the face of an inexorable enemy. "Too late," it had said to me when I was striving to hasten away from London, and then it had lagged through the minutes which lost me Felix. "Too late," it said now to my anxious heart, when I was hastening back. It seemed to me ages before we could get a cab, and again

did miles and miles of streets seem to lie twixt me and my goal.

I flew up the stairs when I reached the house where Felix lodged, on and on towards the top where he had often said he lived. The first door I came to I opened. The room within was small and had a deserted look. A fire was dying in the grate, pieces of brown paper and lengths of twine lay about on the floor. One who had inhabited it had been packing there and had gone. Flushing all over with almost unbearable misery I tore at the bell. The landlady had been following me upstairs, and entered now with Anne. A stout woman with a big pale face and dark eyes that looked curiously at me.

"You are too late if you want to see Mr. Gray," she said. "He has just left. He gave up these rooms suddenly and has gone abroad to join a relation; his grandmother, I think he said."

As she spoke her face seemed to me to change,

and to become enormously big and white like that of my inexorable enemy the clock. I think I was near swooning at that moment.

“Has he left any address?” asked Anne, divining by instinct the question I had not strength to put myself.

“None whatever. He made up his mind very suddenly; in fact I don’t think on Saturday he had any intention of going abroad at all. I heard nothing of it until Sunday at any rate. All yesterday he was very busy arranging his affairs, and this morning he paid his bill, and a week’s rent instead of notice. He took everything away with him and said he should not be returning. Poor gentleman! He looked very ill. There was some trouble I am sure, but he was not one to talk about himself. I’m sorry I can’t give you his address, but he gave me no hint of where he was going any more than of why he was going. All I know for certain is that he

drove off to catch the club train, 3 P.M. from Victoria. Perhaps if you drove after him at once you might be just in time to say good-bye. You are not far from Victoria Station here."

Strength came back to me at this suggestion. "Come," I cried, seizing hold of Anne's cloak, and almost dragging her out of the room. Almost as excited as I, she rushed after me down the stairs, and a moment later we were tearing along the streets to Victoria. We wasted five precious minutes by going first to an utterly wrong part of the station. I was nearly frantic when I discovered this mistake, and no porter seemed to have time to attend to us. At length a gentleman took pity on our helplessness, and offered us his services.

"The club train, for going abroad—I must catch it," I said feverishly.

"You are on quite a wrong platform. This is the Brighton and South Coast line, you want the

London, Chatham, and Dover. I doubt if you'll catch the club train, but we'll see. Follow me—this way."

We followed quickly where he led but it seemed a long way from the one line to the other.

"Ah! Just in time! There's your train!" exclaimed our guide when at last we reached the right platform.

Yes, there it was, just a little ahead, to the right. I ran wildly forward, my heart beating almost to suffocation. The others followed me.

"Oh, by Jove! Hard luck, the train's off!" exclaimed the stranger-friend behind me.

My knees trembled beneath me and I came suddenly to a full stop.

"And there he is!" screamed Anne. "Oh, look Miss, in that saloon carriage, bending down. Oh, somebody, stop the train!"

Just for an instant, as the train sped by, I caught sight of Felix. A desolate man in a grey

suit sitting by the window with his face buried in his hands. Oh! why did he not look up and see me standing there in helpless misery? Only for an instant was I given this last glimpse of my lover, then I found myself gazing at the back of the departing train.

“Oh, dear! Oh, dear!” cried Anne, wringing her hands. “How unfortunate to miss him again and by so little. You are just too late every time. I never saw such hard luck.”

“No,” I said, feeling quite numb with despair, “not hard luck. It is the punishing hand, the punishing hand which has kept me back every time. It is no use to struggle against the punishing hand. Take me home, Anne, take me home.”

She took me home. Good kind woman, she would not let me succumb to despair. The whole way back she kept telling me that Matthew would be with me that evening, and that he would be surely able to do something, he was so

clever. So constantly did she give me this assurance that at length I began to believe in it a little myself. A faint hope crept back into my heart. Matthew might yet save me, Matthew who was so clever, so ingenious, so full of resource; Matthew who was such an experienced man, who had such a wonderful talent for knowing the right thing to do in a difficulty. If anyone in the world could help me, surely Matthew could. I dwelt upon this thought until it grew and grew in my mind, and became a conviction that Matthew was to save me. How, I knew not, unless by following Felix over the world himself, but somehow he was to save me.

I watched for his coming as a drowning man watches for a spar which the waves are tossing to his side. Two hours after our return from London he came, with his master. The barouche drove up gaily to the door, and the two men got out, both looking radiant. This was the hour

to which two days ago I had so looked forward, and now it was all I could do to come forward and greet the home-comers at all, so unbearable was my grief and anxiety.

“Ah! Here she is! Here’s the Valkyrie!” cried my uncle, skipping up to me, spotless, fresh, and bland as ever. “My dear, I have much pleasure in shaking hands with you again. It is most pleasant to return to the castle, and to feel I am once more on my own property. Not that I haven’t enjoyed my visit immensely. Of course you know that I’ve been on a pleasant visit, don’t you?”

Here he peered sharply and suspiciously into my face. Matthew gave me a nudge. I knew what it meant. I was to ignore the lunatic asylum, and converse with my uncle as if he had simply been away on a visit. The old insupportable life was beginning again; beginning again without Felix.

“Yes,” I answered, flushing all over with

intolerable weariness. I felt as if I could no longer bear my uncle. His bland smile struck me as more terrible than ever. It was unreal; the mere mask of madness. This man peering into my face was fresh from the madhouse, for weeks he had been one of a company of madmen, any moment he might break out again. It could not be, oh, it could not be that he was to be my companion now until he died. It was too terrible to think that unless Felix came back to me again it must be so. I turned to Matthew and held out my hand to him.

“Oh, Matthew!” I said. I put all my misery into those two words, and instantly Matthew saw that something was wrong.

“My dear Madam! What is it?” he asked anxiously. “You don’t look well, you don’t look yourself. I expected to find you brilliant having heard such happy news from Mr. Felix. Where is he? Hasn’t he come?”

"No." I could not say more, though I made the effort.

"Dear, dear! sorry for that," said my uncle benevolently. "However, dinner can't be kept waiting even for a relation. Matthew--dinner. Never mind the Valkyrie. Her affairs can wait."

The madman had to be humoured. Matthew had to leave me to go and see about dinner. My affairs had to wait. Racked with torture I sat down to the meal, and Matthew, all his radiance gone, stole distressed looks at me as he waited, and the madman prattled and smiled.

"A charming house I've been staying in," he said. "Such very nice people, all so agreeable and anxious to please. Very interested in the common too, all of them; not one person there who did not recognize my undoubted claim to it. Do you play billiards?"

"No," I said, another hot flush coming over me. The old life seemed closing in upon

me hopelessly, the old life, but without Felix.

“Oh! sorry for that. I am thinking of taking to it. It’s a nice game, you must learn it. I played it frequently whilst away. Capital billiard table in the house, and such pleasant gatherings in the evenings when you are well enough to come down. All kinds of entertainments, music, private theatricals, very often dancing. I danced the Caledonians once or twice. Do you know the Caledonians?”

I sat mute. I could not take up the old life again; no, never, never. If Felix did not come back it must go on without me. My silence made no difference to the madman; he prattled on.

“I am afraid we are too few here for the Caledonians, but we might try the minuet some day. There was a charming deer-park where I have been staying. I took long walks there constantly with Matthew and another friend, it was open to everybody, not like my common.

Oh, there was plenty of amusement. We drove to meets sometimes, and once we went to Shrewsbury, such a pretty place! And on Sundays we went to the village church, or attended the Chaplain's service in the house if we were not very well. By the bye, there was a young man there who said he was descended from the god Woden. He was a clever young man, made everyone laugh. Said Niflheim was a very jolly place if you took a cheerful spirit there. Ha! Ha! But he was not good-looking like your Felix. Where is your Felix? Why is he not here to celebrate my return to my home?"

I could bear no more. I rose from the table and walked to the door.

"Why do you get up? Where are you going?" asked my uncle.

"I am not well: not well," I answered.

Matthew held the door open for me. "Oh, Matthew, come to me!" I gasped, as I passed him.

“Matthew, some of the '47 port,” cried out my uncle at the same moment. “You are not waiting at all properly to-night.”

“Yes, Sir.—The first possible moment, dear Madam,” answered Matthew, looking almost distracted between us. He was anxious to serve both, but my uncle came first. He was mad; I was only on the verge of madness.

It seemed ages before Matthew could come to me. Like a caged animal I paced up and down in the library awaiting him. At last he came.

“The master has composed himself to sleep. And now, Madam, what is it?” he inquired anxiously, coming up to where I stood in the middle of the room.

I poured forth the whole story, scarcely pausing to take breath between my excited utterances. Matthew seemed the only possible saviour just then. In him lay my last hope. He would surely do something when he knew all. I finished, and looked wildly and entreatingly up at him.

CHAPTER VI.

MATTHEW looked back at me quite aghast at first; then slowly a very stern look crept into his face.

“Matthew, you will save me?” I cried, frightened by that look.

“No, Madam,” he said decidedly. “I saved you once ; I gave you solemn warnings. No one can save you now. You have brought your doom upon yourself. Mr. Felix has left you, and you deserve no better.”

“Do you mean, Matthew, that you will do nothing?” I cried, a cold feeling creeping over me.

“There is nothing to be done. Mr. Felix has

given you up. And no man could or would ask him to come back to you."

"But, Matthew, if you could follow him, by that train, the club train, and explain——"

"Where can I follow? We do not know where he has gone; he took care to leave no address behind him. He has deliberately severed all connection with you. Besides, I cannot leave my master to follow anyone. And what can I explain? Nothing can explain away persistent deceit, cruel ingratitude. No, Madam, you have made your bed and you must lie upon it."

"But, Matthew, you surely cannot understand. If Felix does not come back to me my life is ruined. It is ruined for ever. I cannot live without him. I have had him ever since I was a child."

"I know it, Madam."

"But, Matthew, he is all I have in the world," I said, beginning to tremble. "All I have for

father and mother, all I have for brother and sister, for guide, lover, friend."

"I know it, Madam."

"But, Matthew, if Felix cannot be brought back, his life is ruined too. His misery will be equal to mine, his loneliness will be equal to mine. I was his only joy."

"I know it, Madam."

There was something so terribly hopeless, so inexorably final in that "I know it," of Matthew's, I could not bear it. In Matthew had lain my last hope; that hope had failed me. I could bear no more. In three days I had suffered more than many suffer in a lifetime. My senses seemed leaving me. A wild frenzy seized my soul. The whole world was steeped in black despair. In my frenzy I screamed aloud, again, and again, like a mad thing, and flung my arms wildly above my head. Somewhere, somehow, I must find relief.

My screams awoke my uncle. He came and

stood in the doorway, and stared at me with a bland smile.

“Will she have to go to Shropshire?” he asked.

For answer Matthew slammed the door in his face and locked it, as though quite beside himself. Then he came back to me where I stood screaming, and in his eyes which met my frenzied ones, I saw a look of awful fear. The look of one who sees some dread spectre far away. I did not understand the look then, but now I know what it meant. He saw, or thought he saw, the dread spectre of madness stalking o’er the land. And at the thought of such a horror coming upon me, his anger at my wrongdoing was beaten back like spray before the wind.

“O God! Not her! Not her as well!” I heard him say, and then he put his arm tenderly round my shoulders and said:

“Don’t, Madam; don’t scream. Control your-

self: it is dangerous to give way like that. You might get beyond yourself suddenly. Listen! Oh, dear Madam, listen! There is hope. Do you hear me, Madam? There is hope. Oh, my dear child, listen! Listen, and I will show you where hope lies. Despair should never be suffered to come upon the soul. There is always hope——”

His touch and his words fell upon me just as I was beginning to think there was no longer any tenderness or sympathy for me in the world. I think they saved me from madness, but it was perilously near. I dropped my arms, with a great effort controlled my screams, and strove to listen and to understand. But it was too late for any comfort to reach me. I had got past it. Exposure to damp and cold, sleepless nights, fatiguing days, and, above all, mental agony, had played havoc with my delicate frame. Of all that Matthew continued to say to me I understood not a word, and of all that they did to me afterwards

I knew nothing. For fever, twin-brother to madness, had laid burning hands upon my brain.

For weeks I lay in the fierce clasp of the fever. Very near was I then to finding the undiscovered country. My feet hovered over its dark boundary many a night and day; once, almost did I pass over, never to return. Skill, care, and my own youthfulness fought for me and kept me back, else had I gone. I knew naught of my danger. The fever was to me as an ugly dream. The beginning was wrapped in vast wild vagueness. I bathed in fiery floods, I resided in thrilling regions of thick-ribbed ice, I was imprisoned in the viewless winds and blown with restless violence round about the pendent world. Then the elements grew gentler. A crisp crackling as of a far-off fire, soft refreshing motions in the air, sweet yet exhilarating scents obtruded themselves upon my consciousness. Then upon my ears fell a strange yet familiar sound, the sound of a voice

in prayer. It came and went, did that strange yet familiar voice, but ever were its accents the accents of prayer.

I tried to recognize the voice, but it eluded me, and passed out of hearing whenever I made the effort, to return again later, like a dream within a dream. Then vagueness fled away, and my impressions grew definite and distressing. I seemed to be rushing through miles and miles of streets in a cab. Rain was pouring down upon the pavements; they grew murkily glossy and shone beneath the gas-lamps; ghostly shadows flitted along them beneath the shade of dripping umbrellas. In vain did I implore the driver to stop, with hideous eternal persistence he drove me on and on, and ever by my side was a grinning fiendish face peering into mine, and mocking at my agony. Then it seemed to me I was waiting in a large gas-lit station, consumed with desire to get home, yet aware all the time I was too

late. Fiendish faces were all around me. I cried aloud for someone to come and take me away; and then suddenly the platform changed to a great desolate plain, and far away I could see coming towards me a dark figure. When that dark figure reached me my misery would be over and all would be well. But though the dark figure came on and on it never drew any nearer, no, though I cried to it, and sickened with maddening suspense and longing. Then suddenly I seemed to know all this horror was but a dream. I had awakened from it to a renewed consciousness of the strange yet familiar voice raised in the accents of prayer. The voice grew more and more distinct, the very words fell clearly on my brain at last.

“O God! Spare her, give her back to us; let me not see the death of the child. Thy chastening hand has been laid heavily upon this afflicted family, lift it, O Lord, from off this helpless,

suffering, misguided young creature. Smite her not down in her youth: give her back the light of reason, the joy of health, the hope of love. Be pitiful. Oh, let her live!”

Once more the voice passed out of hearing. No, there it was again. I listened intently.

“My poor dear young mistress. O Madam, dear Madam, come back to us.”

Why! it was Matthew’s voice! It eluded me no longer. I recognized it distinctly. I opened my eyes: of course; it was Matthew. There he was bending over me with his dark well-known face. It was Matthew praying over me, weeping over me. I smiled at him feebly.

“I heard you at last, Matthew,” I said. “I have come back.”

At these words Matthew fell upon his knees by the side of the bed. “I thank Thee, O God, I thank Thee,” he said, hiding his face in his hands.

A quiet step approached my bedside. A

beautiful woman-face framed in the pure white of a large cap bent over me. Deft tender hands set off by fresh white cuffs smoothed back my hair and arranged my pillow.

"Who is it?" I whispered.

"Your nurse, your good kind nurse," answered Matthew, lifting a face streaming with tears from the counterpane.

"I heard Matthew all the time," I said, addressing the nurse slowly. "He was calling me back, wasn't he? But I couldn't quite recognize the voice, or understand at first. Then suddenly I seemed to come back to his world, come back to his voice, from, oh! such a distance away."

"The prayer of a righteous man availeth much," said the nurse, and then I saw there were tears in her eyes too.

The words she had used seemed familiar; I tried to remember if they came from Shakspeare. The effort was beyond me. I lapsed into a

delicious state of drowsiness, and a night out of the past came like a dream, and lived itself over again for me. Once more I was lying on a sofa in the library. Overhead was the madman, asleep. The fire lazily dropped coals through the long sweet hours, the charwoman slept in an arm-chair near the fire with her feet straight out in front of her, and by my side, holding my hand, was Felix.

This was the beginning of my recovery. At first it was enough to lie still and silent, free of fever and hideous dreams; then came a more painful stage. I became conscious of excessive weakness. So tired, so worn-out was I, it would have grieved me not at all to shuffle off this mortal coil and slip away from the world. It was too much weariness to live.

But I had to live. It was willed I should recover, and I did recover. I had to go through all the wearying stages of slow convalescence.

By degrees keen consciousness came back to me, bearing in its train memories of a vanished past, realization of a painful present, dread of a joyless future. Day by day, as health improved, strengthened also the power of suffering. At length came the morning when I made my first complete toilette, and with tottering footsteps went downstairs and lay once more upon the sofa in the library. Then began such an aching longing for Felix it retarded my recovery almost as much as though it had been violent physical pain. I was so weak, so weary, and I knew if he had been with me he would have been so infinitely soothing, so pitifully tender. His very presence would have inspired me with fresh life. To get well without him was merely to perpetuate weariness. At that time I would far rather have died than lived.

The spring waned, and the summer turned into autumn before any measure of strength

returned to me. Then my nurse went away, the doctor slackened in his visits, and the old life began again. The old life, without Felix.

Many a time in my weakness I prayed I might never again have to take up the thread of that old life, but I had to take it up and settle down with it. No one knew, no one can ever understand how much I suffered then; no, not even Matthew. My life had no longer motive, interest, or pleasure. The zest, the spirit, had gone out of it. There was no one, nothing to live for. I dragged through my days, and half my nights were spent in courting sleep. For sweet refreshing sleep was the last and slowest thing of all to come back to me. My brain was still a little excitable; and vain longing for Felix, and wild repentance of past folly kept it in a perpetual state of unrest. Mild opiates were prescribed for me, but they were worse than useless. Not poppy, nor mandragora, nor

all the drowsy syrups of the world could medicine me to the sweet sleep which had been mine before I lost my lover.

“The doctor advises that you should be sent away for a thorough change,” said Matthew to me, suddenly, one day.

I looked up at him listlessly from the arm-chair in which I was sitting.

“Change!” I said. “What can change do for me, Matthew? Where can I go? Who is there I can go to?”

Matthew stood meditating. “I have been thinking, Madam, that we might advertise. I am sure there are many kind ladies to be found who would gladly take charge of you for a month or two. You might board in some pleasant family living in a pretty spot, or perhaps we might find a nice person who, for a consideration, would accompany you to the sea-side, or any other place you might have a fancy for.”

"No, thank you, Matthew. I don't care to board with strangers, or to go to the sea-side with a person who would accompany me for a consideration. It would do me no good. I had rather you left me alone. I shall get used to things as they are in time."

"Madam, I cannot leave you alone. Here you sit, day after day, white, spiritless, doing nothing. Some change must be made. You cannot get used to things as they are."

I burst out sobbing. "I must, I must," I said, "for they can never be different."

"Oh, don't cry, don't cry, dear young thing!" entreated Matthew. "It does you such harm, makes your head ache, and wearies you out. Here! Let me put this cushion under your head. Why, your poor little hands are stone cold. I must fetch you some wine, and a shawl; you want warming and cheering, that's what you want."

The kind creature bustled out full of concern, and bustled in again with wine and wraps, anxious to do anything, everything for me. Yes, he was right, I wanted warming and cheering, my heart was cold, starved, wretched. But the one thing that could have warmed and cheered me was not in Matthew's power to bring, and no one knew that better than he. I wanted Felix. I longed for him to come in through the doorway, and see me looking white and changed and ill. I pictured him as he would surely look then, how he would rush to my side saying pitifully:

"Oh, my little love! What is the matter? Have you been ill? Have you been pining for Felix? Here he is, come back to you, and the dear little home is ready. Come, little love, your days of waiting are over, come away and let us be happy together for ever.

This was what I wanted. This was what

could never be. Matthew read it all in my face as he wrapped me in the shawls. I could see he did by the intense sympathy of his expression and manner. But he breathed no word of it now. Neither did he give me any hope. Every effort that could be made through the medium of writing to trace Felix he had made: with no result. When he had sadly acquainted me with the fact that he had made these efforts I had listlessly thanked him, then later burst into so terrible a storm of sobbing he never ventured to approach the subject again. Felix's name was now never mentioned between us. The wound was too deep to be touched.

I drank the wine, and then Matthew began again to press me to take a change, or at least to allow him to advertise. I combated the idea resolutely.

"I cannot go amongst strangers," I said, "I have not the spirit, indeed I have not, Matthew.

Please, please let me stay here quietly. In this house I can be silent when I like, sit alone when I like. I no longer wish for companions. Strangers would stare at me, they would wonder at me, they would ask me questions. I should have to smile, to talk, to pretend—Matthew, it would drive me mad.”

With a sigh Matthew relinquished the point. “Well, Madam, if you will not go away for a change we cannot make you do so, but it would have pleased me if you would have gone. It is not right you should go on as you are going on now.”

“If you will let me stay on here quietly I won’t go on as I am going on now. What shall I do to please you, Matthew? Tell me, and I will try to do it.”

“Well, Madam, if you would begin practising again it would please me,” answered Matthew, after a moment’s thought. “The house is sad and

silent without your music. I assure you I often feel low myself and miss the music sadly. I quite long to hear the sound of the piano again."

"Very well, Matthew," I replied with an effort, "I will begin practising again." I felt I owed the devoted servant something. He had nursed me tenderly through my illness. Night after night he had shared the nurse's vigils. It was his voice that had prayed over me during that dreadful time of fever, that had called me back when my feet wandered on the borders of the undiscovered country. His hand had clasped mine during the long hours of prostration that followed when I had fancied it was Felix by my side.

Pleased at having gained this minor point, Matthew went to the piano, and with a brightening face opened it and pulled out the music stool. "Do begin at once, dear Madam," he said imploringly, "it will be such a treat, such a pleasure."

I crossed the room to the piano and bent over the cabinet in which I kept my music. The Moonlight Sonata lay uppermost. The Moonlight Sonata, "*with Felix's love.*"

I put it aside with a shudder. To play it would have been like opening a grave, uncovering a coffin. Next came a song: "Orpheus with his lute."

Only once had Felix sung that song in my hearing. As my eyes fell upon the title, in memory did I again live through the scene. It was his grandmother's drawing-room, and I had just refused him the only favour he had ever asked of me. He stood singing, and through the air rang a high beautiful note followed by a strain that had a dying fall. The voice of Orpheus calling to me. The voice that had called to me for years in the language of the most beautiful song of all, the language of love. The voice that I had silenced for ever.

I put away the song with the Moonlight Sonata; the sight of it pierced my heart. Never since that one far-away time had Felix sung it to me. It had been reserved, a sacred song; for it had been my fancy that the song should next be sung on the eve of my wedding. It should be Orpheus calling to his bride to come to him for ever. That now could never be. My Orpheus had gone. Gone away a broken-hearted man. Ingratitude had burst his heart, as, centuries ago, it had burst great Cæsar's. Cæsar fell not before the blows of his enemies, he fell when the well-beloved Brutus stabbed him. The man he had loved so much. For Brutus was Cæsar's angel. And I—I had been Felix's angel. Mine, mine, was the inexpressible sin of Brutus.

"No, never again," I cried out to Matthew passionately. "There is no more music for me. There is no music in the world for traitors. Here! Lock up the piano. Take the key, take

it away and never ask me to play again. Leave me alone to my grief. It cannot hurt as I have hurt. Go away, Matthew, and leave me alone. Do you hear? Oh, leave me, leave me, Matthew!"

Frightened by my violence, afraid perhaps of exciting me further in my weak state, Matthew took the key and left me. And there was no more music in the castle.

The months lagged slowly by, unbroken by a single event. There was no news, there were no visitors, there were no pleasures. Just the daily round: rising, dressing, eating, walking, reading; nothing more. Just Matthew and my uncle and I, all through the dreary winter. Not even a letter came for me, though for weeks I watched for one with an eagerness that bordered on fever whenever the postman's rat-tat did by a rare chance sound on the door. The monotony was terrible. Complete listlessness and stagnation

fell at length upon my spirit. Even my uncle grew distressed about me after a time, and began to look at me anxiously and to make remarks upon my pallor and lack of energy. He tried to be kind to me in his own peculiar way. One evening he even left his '47 port to come and talk to me in the library.

“Can’t we do something to amuse you, my dear?” he said, planting his little fat body on the music-stool, and staring at me with round blue eyes, the bland smile a little less pronounced than usual. “Some of those things we used to do in Shropshire, you know. Now would you like to dance the minuet? Only say the word, and I’ll dance it with you with pleasure. Matthew can hum the air whilst we dance.”

I said I would rather not dance the minuet.

“Well—the Caledonians—no, impossible, too few. Private theatricals now. Plenty of parts for two. Sir Peter and Lady Teazle, or Romeo and Juliet,

or—Othello and Desdemona. Yes, capital! Let us act Othello and Desdemona. You like Shakspeare, and I could easily smother you, you know.”

I said I would rather not be smothered.

“Oh, well! let us see what else there is,” he said disappointedly. “I have it:—Dumb Crambo! Do you know Dumb Crambo? You act, you know, without speaking, and the others guess what you’re acting. We choose a word to rhyme upon—‘Nag’ for instance—and then we act Ag, Bag, Cag, Dag, Eag, Fag, Gag, Hag, and so on through the alphabet down to Zag. Would you like Dumb Crambo?”

I said I did not care for Dumb Crambo.

This seemed to be the end of my uncle’s resources. He had evidently nothing further to suggest, so sat and silently stared at me. After a time this palled upon him, and, looking slightly discomfited, he withdrew.

“The Valkyrie is pining,” I heard him say to

Matthew in the hall. "She is pining for her mate. She has never been the same since her Felix died. Of course as you told me of his death in strict confidence, I never mention it to her, but I really do think the poor thing needs some consolation."

Yes, he was right, I needed consolation, but nowhere, nowhere could I find it. Felix was indeed dead to me, dead as though he were buried in his grave. That being so, nowhere in the wide world could there be for me any consolation.

The long evenings in the house grew intolerable to me towards the end of the winter. I felt imprisoned, like a wild bird in a cage. To ease this feeling I used to escape from the house after nightfall, and wander about on the common in the dark until bed time. At first I found the common soothing. By night it had a weird charm of its own. It was such a shadowy world, so

full of suggestiveness, so open to possibilities, I felt sometimes as if even the miraculous might happen. Then I began to find it terrible. Often I looked round with a wildly beating heart fancying I heard Felix's footstep coming softly after me in the darkness. Or amidst the ghostly shadows of trees and bushes ahead of me, with a kind of shock I used to descry his form, motionless on still nights, rocking to and fro in silent misery when the night breeze arose and swept across the turf. There were times when low wailing used to sound in my ears, unmistakable wailing from the impenetrable blackness that closed in the distant reaches of the common. To my morbid imagination the wailing was like the cry of a broken heart, the cry of Felix's heart reaching me from the darkness to which I had consigned it. By degrees the dark common became to me an oppressive, terrible, irresistible spirit. I dreaded it, yet could not shake off its

yoke. Its power grew and grew. I no longer dared wander far from the house, but within the house after nightfall I could not remain. The shadowy world without drew me to it with formless yet resistless hands.

CHAPTER VII.

ONE night I was out as usual, wandering about the shadowy stretches of the common. The faint light from the stars made all near objects perceptible, but beyond closed in upon me the dark impenetrable wall which had of late become so terribly familiar. Twice that night I had fancied I heard Felix's ghostly footstep following me. A hundred times I had descried his dark form waiting for me immobile and terrible amongst the gorse bushes, and had fled from it, though my reason told me it was but a shadow. At last a footstep fell upon my ear with such distinctness, I knew I could not be mistaken.

No ghostly footstep this time, but the irregular uncertain fall of living feet. He was searching for me. I turned round and stood waiting, my heart beating until I felt nearly choked, my eyes straining to see him coming to me from out of the blackness. Nearer; nearer: he would be with me soon. Yes, there was his dark figure advancing out of the gloom. Was it a real figure, or was I again only madly imagining? A wild unreasoning terror took possession of me.

“Oh, keep away! keep away!” I cried, beating back the dark air that lay between me and the advancing figure with my hands. “Go back to your darkness. You cannot be Felix, you are ghostly, you are no living thing——!”

“Madam!” cried the voice of Matthew. Its terrified tone arrested me in the midst of my own terror. With an effort I calmed myself and quietly allowed him to come up to me.

“My dear, you must come back to the house with me at once,” he said, in trembling tones. “You gave me quite a turn, crying out to me in that wild way. It only proves what I say, that you should not wander about on the common alone in the dark. It is enough to try anyone’s nerves. Do, dear child, come back with me to the library, where the fire burns and the lamp is lit, and things at least look cheerful.”

I knew well Matthew did not like me to wander thus alone; many a time he had sought to deter me, but I heeded him not. I shook my head now, without moving.

“You will take cold, Madam,” he went on, “there is a keen March wind rising.”

There was no doubt about that. His coat-tails flapped, and his white hair waved wildly about as the breeze sprang up and swept coldly past us. But I showed him my furs, and said I did not mind being out in the cold.

“But, Madam—you oblige me to speak plainly—it is wrong of you to come and nurse your misery here like this. And very bad for you mentally. You ought to come in and at least try to occupy yourself. To wander here alone, night after night, will have a very bad effect upon your mind.”

“I am not alone,” I answered, with a little hard laugh, “the common gives me plenty of company; oh! most strange company. I thought you were one of that company, Matthew.”

Matthew started, then began again to implore me to come back to the warm, light library. His entreaties grew so excited, so anxious, so incoherent, that at length I looked at him in astonishment, wondering why he should be so exceedingly distressed at this new habit of mine. After all I never stayed out later than ten, and I always returned to the house quietly and safely. Suddenly the real reason of his deep anxiety

flashed upon me. He was afraid for my mind, afraid lest it should get unhinged, lest I should go mad, like his master. The idea gave me quite a shock. It angered me that Matthew should think such a thing. The blood mounted into my face, and my hands shook.

"Matthew! do not stand there looking at me and talking to me as if I were going out of my mind," I said. "Go to your master, who *is* mad, and leave me in peace. If you come after me again, I will wander further from the house, where you cannot find me."

At this threat Matthew evidently began to think he had been acting unwisely, for, assuring me he had only been anxious I should not take cold, or be frightened by the darkness, he withdrew.

But the idea he had suggested remained, and took root in my mind. I gradually began to think that it might be possible I was in reality

as mad as my uncle, only so far no one had perceived it. Looking back upon my past life it seemed to me that I had done many things that savoured of madness. I had been demented at Mrs. Vaughan-Price's party, I had been demented on every occasion on which I had tormented Felix. It was never my real self that had pained him. It was a wicked, irresistible spirit within me. The spirit of Madness. It was not myself. My real self had repented of it afterwards. The same evil spirit had tempted me to meet D'Arcy. I was mad when I met D'Arcy, mad every time. I was mad, quite mad, when I lost Felix. No sane person could ever have been in such tumult of mind as I was then. As for that illness they had called "fever", it had been simple raving madness. No one could really doubt I had been mad then. Mad as sea and wind when both contend. And now I was going melancholy mad. I could not shake off my

sorrow. It dominated me. I was the sport of my own emotions. Grief walked up and down with me, resistless in its influence, terrible in its perpetual attendance. Yes, I was melancholy mad, like Ophelia.

I dwelt upon the parallel which I fancied existed between my case and Ophelia's until I brought myself to the dangerous point of—her end. Then, a little frightened, for the train of thought brought with it hideous suggestions, I tried to think no more of her.

But the ghost Matthew had started, continued to stalk on the common, and would not be laid. One question began to absorb my mind. Was I, or was I not mad? So far I had always considered myself sane, but no doubt so had my uncle considered himself sane. I had been unconscious of insanity, but no doubt so had Hamlet—I would not think of Ophelia—until cruel circumstances developed the latent madness

that was in him. Then he sank beneath the load of life, as I was sinking now. Hamlet from himself was ta'en away. His mother knew; his friends knew it; not until the end did he himself know it, and proclaim his own madness.

I began to watch my own mind. Yes, Rosamund from herself was being ta'en away. Slowly but surely the terrible spirit of Madness was dispossessing me of my real self. I felt it. As the days went on it seemed to me that nothing I now did or said was prompted by my true natural self. Terror took possession of me. My soul was full of dismay. The common by night became too full of dreadful possibilities to be borne. I fled from its suggestive silence and shadows, the instinct of self-preservation triumphing over the morbid attraction of the place. As persistently did I now seek companionship as I had before avoided it. I felt safer within the house, within touch of human beings. No

one could save my mind, but if the fit should work,—if the madness should come on, sudden, violent, uncontrollable, then better not to be on a dark common, alone in the city of kites and crows. There was running water on the common, in the hollows that lay by night beyond the black wall of darkness; there were ponds still nearer; a hideous thing might happen.

So I came back to my little world, and tried to behave as if I were sane. I compelled myself to a forced sanity, so at least it seemed to me then. But day and night I was haunted by the dread fear of the moment when all effort would be in vain, and I should from myself be ta'en away. If ever the least excitement came over me, or any involuntarily spoken word escaped my lips, I trembled, lest the moment should have come.

So absorbed was I in the study of my own mental condition, I had no eyes for others, else

I should have surely perceived that what I was dreading for myself was approaching my poor uncle, with swift terrible strides. He was constantly flushed, excited, irritable. I noticed it spasmodically, but the dread significance of the signs escaped me, though my past experience should have been enough to open my eyes. Sometimes it struck me vaguely that he was getting madder, but I had no time to watch the strides of his cruel malady, so busy was I studying the insidious advance of my own. Matthew seemed utterly worn out and wretched. He was thinner than ever, in fact he looked exceedingly ill. I saw that plainly, but I thought I understood the reason why. He was grieving over me because I had gone the same way as his master, he was worn out because there were two to watch now instead of one. Poor Matthew! Looking back upon that time I wonder he survived it. For though I did not at the time

realize the fulness of his double anxiety, I know now that he did fear for my reason.

One day, a wet windy day towards the end of March, I had been left to myself a little more than usual. Towards the afternoon, I fancied I was becoming excited, so I left the library and went in search of Matthew. On my way I met my uncle wandering about, he wandered about a good deal now. He took no notice of me, and I took no notice of him. I found Matthew in the pantry. He was standing by an open drawer reading a newspaper cutting, but when I entered, he pushed the cutting he was reading into the drawer in the most guilty way. His manner struck me. I felt sure that he had not wished me to see what he was reading. Forgetting the fancied excitement which had driven me to seek him, I became suddenly really excited, more than excited, deeply suspicious. I felt sure the cutting in some way related to me, concerned me.

"I want a glass of water, please, Matthew," I said, just as an excuse for my sudden intrusion.

"Dear Madam, why did you not ring and I would have brought it to you," said Matthew, pouring out the water for me hurriedly, and I fancied he seemed annoyed at having been caught reading the newspaper cutting. I said nothing, simply drank the water and went away. But I could not dismiss the matter from my mind. It worried me, as things will worry the mind when it is in an unnatural and morbid state.

That night, very late, long after midnight, I crept downstairs in the dark with a box of matches in my hand. I struck a match when I reached the pantry, and hastily opened the drawer in which I had seen Matthew hide the newspaper cutting. Yes, there it was, pushed under some glass cloths, and with it a pamphlet. I seized them and like a thief crept back to my room. Then I lit my lamp and sat down to read what

I had stolen. I had not undressed, but the night was cold, my fire had gone out, and I shivered and trembled as I read. The newspaper cutting was about solanaceous plants. One plant was treated of at great length: the *Hyoscyamus Niger*, or Henbane.

"*Henbane*," it began, "possesses in a more marked degree than the other solanaceous plants, *calmative effects*, and is much used in *maniacal excitement*. This property is due to the alkaloid Hyoscine which is a powerful cerebral sedative."

These two sentences were enough to show me why Matthew had looked so guilty when I surprised him. He was anticipating *maniacal excitement* on my part and wished to be ready with something *calmative*. I wondered whether he had laid in a big stock of *Hyoscyamus Niger*, and where he kept it. It was comforting to think there was something *calmative* in the house, and yet the thought that Matthew should

have obtained it for me seemed like a confirmation of my worst fears.

Next I read the pamphlet. It was a lecture on Heredity which had been delivered at Gresham College the previous October. The beginning of the lecture was a little uninteresting to me, and seemed to be about cats' tails and apes' brains. But it grew more interesting as it proceeded to the main subject. I read how colour-blindness and a tendency to particular diseases, such as scarlet fever, could be inherited, even from a remote ancestor. Also talent could be inherited, Bach springing from a family of musicians, Titian from a family of painters. It seemed you could also inherit deformities, for thirty children in three generations were spoken of as having six fingers on each hand. Sabre cuts could also be inherited, and hare lips, and deaf-and-dumbness: it was dreadful to read of. Intemperance could be inherited, sometimes a man

would even show a preference for the favourite drink of an ancestor. I wondered when I came to this point whether my uncle had ever had an ancestor with a weakness for port. Then suddenly a new idea presented itself to me, giving me quite a shock. Had he inherited his madness? Was it the inheritance of our family, as music had been the inheritance of Bach, and painting of Titian? It was terrible to think it might be so.

I read on and came to madness. Yes, that, too, was hereditary. Madness seemed to close in upon me as I read; a hideous hopeless doom. For one moment a ray of hope shot into my heart as I remembered that Lawrence Dillwyn was my great-uncle, and that my mother, his niece, had died possessing the sweet clear light of reason. Perhaps the curse had died out in the generation immediately preceding mine; but no, the dreadful lecture took even that hope

away. I read of *Atavism* as I went on, and learnt the curse will sometimes skip a generation. There was no hope anywhere, only fearful black madness from which there was no escaping. Oh, what an inheritance! What a fearful thing!

I continued to read. Everything was hereditary. The appalling truth unfolded itself before me like a horrible nightmare. It seemed to me as I read that men and women were simply victims to a horrible law. We were, and had helplessly to remain, that which our ancestors had made us. We were scarcely responsible beings. Our diseases were not the accidents of our lives, our crimes were not voluntary actions, they were the results of the dreadful law of inheritance. Oh, what a cruel law! That the sins of the fathers should be visited thus upon the innocent children for countless generations! And not only sins, but deformities, afflictions, very weaknesses, such as lack of will or want of self-

control. Why, Life was only prepared misery, predestined doom.

I flung the pamphlet away from me in fierce overwhelming despair, and sat staring at it hopelessly, my soul full of wild rebellion. Then I remembered the pamphlet must be restored to its hiding-place before morning came and Matthew was about the house again, so, picking it up, and the newspaper cutting, I stole downstairs once more and replaced them in the drawer. I fancied I heard someone moving outside the pantry door as I did so. Quick as thought I blew out the lighted match I was holding and listened. It must have been a mistake, for there was no further sound. I waited a moment to make sure, then I hurriedly escaped and ran upstairs, in my haste leaving the matches behind me. When I reached the upper landing I paused to take breath. To my left was the closed door of my own room, in front of me was the landing, almost

as large as the hall below, softly carpeted, and lit by a dimly burning lamp that hung from the ceiling. To my right was a long corridor unlit by any lamp, but across its darkness at the further end there shot a ray of bright light which streamed evidently from an open door. The door of my uncle's room, the end room on the right of the corridor.

Urged by a sudden irresistible impulse I crept down the long dark corridor until I reached the ray of light, and could look into my uncle's room. A large, handsomely furnished room, ablaze with light. The first thing that caught my eye was the figure of Matthew asleep in an arm-chair by the side of the bed, which occupied the exact centre of the room. Oh, poor Matthew! The abandonment of utter weariness was in his attitude. His head hung down on one side, his hands were relaxedly clasping the arms of the chair, sleep had overpowered him in the midst of a

vigil. What a life, what a martyrdom! He had to sit up and watch my uncle even in the night. There was no true rest for him at any hour.

From his weary figure my eyes stole to a motionless figure stretched on the bed.

My uncle, asleep.

CHAPTER VIII.

OFTEN I had pictured to myself my uncle in his sleep. The thought of him, sleeping, had haunted my brain many a time when I lay awake in my own bed. Always I had pictured him lying with a terrible smile upon his face. Now, at last, I saw him, asleep.

He lay propped up on high pillows, covered to the throat with a white coverlet, his face turned full towards me in the bright light. Oh, horror! What a face, what an expression! Though his eyes were closed, the cunning of madness, the cruelty of madness, seemed to creep down from beneath the closed lids and spread as I gazed,

spread over the whole face. And on his lips dwelt the smile of a fiend. It struck terror to my heart, did that awful smile; it seemed to spread as I gazed, spread and mingle fearfully with the cunning and cruelty that stole down from the closed lids. I could not bear to look upon it. Shuddering I fled to my own room, and shut myself in there. I did not attempt to undress and go to bed. Impossible to sleep. I had just been gazing upon madness; who, having gazed upon such a thing, could come away and sleep? I sat down and tried to think of other things. Impossible also. The hideous vision of the madman, asleep, returned again and again. My lamp began to flicker and go out. I looked round for some matches to light my candles. Then I remembered I had left them in Matthew's pantry. I was afraid to go down again and fetch them, my nerves had become unstrung, the thought of the dark passages and stairs frightened me. The thought of

being left in utter darkness frightened me also. The madman's face would come and gleam at me out of the dark corners.

I opened the door slightly, just enough to see that ray of light at the end of the corridor. One cry now and I could summon Matthew to my side in an instant. The madman was asleep. I had no need to be frightened.

Yet I was frightened. Cowering I crept into bed, dressed as I was, and drew the bedclothes round me tightly. They seemed a kind of protection. I drew them up to my throat; the pillows were very high; I fancied I must look like my uncle. That terrible smile! It was beginning to creep over my face; I could feel it as I lay there, feel it spreading over my face, pervading every line. Oh, horror upon horrors! Was that smile also to be my inheritance? What a cruel thing! Why should such things be allowed? Why had madness ever been suffered to come

into the world to be an inheritance? It was a cruel wrong to mankind such a thing should be permitted by the Almighty. Why should so hopeless a doom have been suffered to fall upon a bright, beautiful, affectionate lad, such as Matthew said my uncle had been, to turn his long life into a calamity and a horror? An unoffending youth condemned to the most awful of all afflictions. And now why should the curse fall upon me, a poor helpless girl? We were wronged, wronged. Everyone born to such a curse was wronged. My uncle and I were of the faction that is wronged. As I thought of it my sense of cruelty and wrong grew insupportable.

“There is no God: there can be no God,” I said at last aloud in the darkness. “There is a wicked, cruel Fiend that manages everything.”

Then I trembled all over, conscious I had said a most impious thing. The room seemed to become suddenly darker. Had my door closed,

or how was it I no longer saw the bright ray of light at the end of the corridor? I had seen it distinctly from where I lay, only a moment before. It disappeared suddenly when I said that impious thing.

An evil darkness seemed to spread and deepen around me. Why had I said so impious a thing? And what was that curious sound? Surely not—yes, it was the sound of running water. How strange to hear it thus in the dead of night. It grew louder and louder; every tap in the house seemed to be running. This must be my uncle's work. The madman was awake, he was up, and about the house. I raised myself in my bed and sat up in much alarm. To shout might anger my uncle, I felt I ought to go and tell Matthew. He could not know, or the taps would not be suffered to run like this. He must be still asleep. Someone ought to awake him.

For a little time I sat thus, trying to summon

up courage to go to Matthew. Then I became suddenly conscious of a dreadful Presence in my room. Through the darkness, mingling with the sound of the running water, it seemed to me I could hear breathing. I listened with nervous intensity: yes, distinct loud breathing, in my room. I tried then to scream for Matthew, but no sound would come. It has ever been so when I am frightened. Fright paralyzes my throat, and when most I need voice it will not come to me. Again and again I tried to scream but could not.

The breathing grew louder, nearer: the Presence was stealing up to my bedside. I would have prayed, but remembered that by my impious words I had forfeited all right to Divine protection.

The horror grew. Something was hanging over me: a Shape; thick, dark, palpable. A hand was on the bed, feeling for me. I could hear it, creeping, creeping, creeping towards me on the counterpane. It was unendurable. I leapt from

my bed, away, away, from the dreadful overhanging Shape, and rushed to the door. But swift as I was, the Shape was swifter, and passed out before me. Then I found myself standing by my open door no longer encompassed by the horror of darkness. The bright ray of light had gone from the end of the corridor, but still there was light, the dim light from the hanging lamp overhead. Voice came back to me at sight of the light, and I screamed wildly for Matthew. Then came a still louder sound of running water from the housemaid's little room next to mine. Instinctively I hurried towards it, and as I turned, from behind the door the Shape leaped out upon me.

It was my uncle! His eyes were fixed and glaring, his lips twitched over his glistening teeth, he was terrible as an Evil Spirit, seen as I saw him then, beneath the faint light of the hanging lamp. A dark cloak was fastened about him, only partially concealing his night-shirt. In his

hand was an old sword, and with it he began to make wild passes at me, every instant growing nearer and nearer.

“You spied on me!” he cried excitedly. “Wicked Valkyrie, you spied on me in my sleep!”

The sword was within a few inches of my face. Oh, would Matthew never come! Yes, he was coming, he was coming. The door at the end of the corridor banged, and his quick footsteps could be heard approaching. Another door banged, a second after, the door of a room usually unoccupied, which opened on to the landing. I turned, so did my uncle, at that unexpected sound. To my amazement, Grayson was coming swiftly towards us. At sight of him my uncle’s face turned livid.

“Never, never again!” he cried, then before either of the two men could reach him he had flung down the sword, and climbed over the balustrade which fenced in the landing between

my bedroom door and the top of the stairs. He swung himself over, and then for an instant he hung over the dark depths below, clutching the top of the rail with his hands.

Never shall I forget the sight of that poor mad white face glaring up at me from the dark background. One terrible instant, then either his fingers gave way, or—he let go. The white face whizzed down into the darkness, a wild cry echoed up, there was a thud, a moan—then shuddering paralyzed silence.

For a moment we could not take in all the horror. We bent over the balustrade, and stared down into the darkness of the hall, and looked at each other with sick dismay. Matthew first broke the awful silence.

“Oh, my master! my master!” he cried, and staggered to the top of the staircase and down into the darkness. Then Grayson ran to fetch a light, the servants came hurrying, turning off the

water-taps, and bearing candles, and then we all went down into the hall.

On the floor lay my uncle, one leg doubled up under him, one arm hanging in a strangely helpless manner by his side, his ghastly face turned upwards, and a little pool of blood beneath his head. He was not dead: no, his face worked, and he gave low moans of pain. They tried to move him, but when they attempted it, he shrieked with so great an agony that for very pity they desisted and let him lie where he had fallen. Grayson managed to prop up his head a little with a cushion, and placed white cloths beneath it to stanch the flow of blood as much as possible, but even when this was done the poor man shrieked, so that they dared not raise him further or attempt to bind up the wound. Brandy was given him, and then when all had been done that could be done, Grayson went with the housemaid to fetch the doctor, for she would not venture across

the dark common alone. Then the cook withdrew, sobbing hysterically. Matthew and I were left alone in the hall with the injured man.

I knelt on one side of him, by the broken arm, and Matthew knelt on the other side, his hand clasping his poor master's. The moans ceased after a little time, and the poor face worked less convulsively. Either pain was leaving him, or he was growing incapable of feeling his own distress. I think that after that he became unconscious for a time.

Then suddenly he seemed to awake into life. His eyes opened, he looked at Matthew, then he looked at me, for we were both bending over him. Oh, strange wonderful thing! His eyes were full of intelligence; he smiled, but it was no longer the old, terribly bland smile. It was the smile of peace; the smile of one who had found something lost for years. A beautiful smile which quite transformed his face.

"Frances," he said, continuing to gaze at me, "I am glad to see you once more."

He thought I was his sister. But he was not mad, instinctively I felt he was not mad any longer. This was his real self, this was my uncle as he should have been. I was like what my grandmother had been, so Matthew had often told me; and, seeing me thus suddenly, in the moment of returning reason, his mind had gone back to the old days when she had been a girl, and the curse had not yet fallen.

"Not Frances," I said in a low voice, "but her daughter's child, Rosamund."

"Oh, yes! Rosamund. Poor little motherless Rosamund. Your mother wrote about you, I remember. I had forgotten. I do not seem to have known you quite well until now. And now that I have recognized you I must leave you. But I shall see Frances again I hope, where I am going."

"Oh, master!" cried poor Matthew. "Have you no word for me?"

My uncle turned and looked at him. "You will never again have to take me to Shropshire, Matthew," he said, "your charge is over."

Matthew hid his face on his master's hand, unable to utter another word.

"I am going where there is no madness," went on my uncle. "God has already made my mind strangely clear."

Only an hour ago I had denied my God, because there was madness in the world. But this man who had suffered all the blackest horrors of madness, acknowledged Him. All impious thoughts rolled away like a dark wave from my soul. They could not live in the light of that dying presence. For my uncle was dying; I saw it now. My uncle; my relation; one of my own kindred. I felt and recognized the tie for the first time. My heart went out to him. He

became suddenly dear to me, suddenly known to me, as himself. My tears gushed forth resistlessly; it was so sad to think this moment of mutual recognition must also be the moment of farewell. But there was one present for whom it was still sadder.

“Oh, master!” cried poor Matthew again, “are you going to leave me, who have cared for you all your life?”

Once more my uncle smiled, the smile which revealed so wonderfully what he might have been. “You’ll follow your master,” he said, still looking at Matthew. “We are all bound for the same place, poor mad ones and all. And when you come I shall remember you. I shall remember Matthew who cared for me all my life. Who stood by me from beginning to end. Whose devotion to me was greater than that of a brother. Rosamund, take care of Matthew. Don’t let him have a lonely old age. It is

getting dark. I think I am going. Matthew, where are you? Hold my hand, Matthew. Hold it to the very last."

"Yes, master," answered Matthew weeping, "I am here."

"Yes, you are here. I feel you; here to the very last. Faithful Matthew. Here to the very last. God reward you. Good-bye—Good-bye—Matthew——"

People were coming in at the front door. The candles flickered in the draught, and weird shadows flitted over the hall, and played over the face of the dying man. It grew grey beneath the dancing shadows, the features assumed a sharp pinched unfamiliar look, the eyes turned a little.....

Lawrence Dillwyn had gone where there is no madness.

BOOK V.

O EASTERN STAR.



Book V.

CHAPTER I.

FOR years Matthew had gone on like a machine, like a thing of iron. So perpetual, so unfailing had been his service, I had grown to think of it as one of the indispensable conditions of life, like fresh air and sunshine. Instinctively, at the moment of my uncle's death, I turned to him for support and guidance. But, lo! the machine had broken down, stopped working. I saw before me a worn-out, heart-broken human creature, lying prostrate and helpless upon the body of his dead master. It was of no use looking to Matthew for guidance any more. Our relative positions had changed suddenly. Grayson and the coach-

man came and lifted him off the dead body. As they did so his poor grief-stricken eyes met mine for a moment, and I realized that he was looking to me for support and guidance. He was helpless as a baby before me. His dead master had committed him to my care. I was all Matthew had in the world.

It was a supreme moment of change. At once I realized the new order of things, and violently readjusted myself to meet it. They were all looking to me, the servants, the doctor, everyone. My madness was forgotten, my private griefs passed away from my mind, there was no time to think of self. One fire burns out another's burning. One pain is lessened by another's anguish. Matthew, thus struck down by the terrible calamity that had happened, demanded all my care. I gave my orders, as calmly and as clearly as I could. Matthew was carried away upstairs to his own room, the doctor and I following, the dead

Presence left for a moment or two where it lay, in awful immovable repose amidst the flickering lights in the hall. Matthew was unconscious when they placed him on his bed, and it was some time before the doctor could bring back the life that had sunk so low in the poor creature. A half opening of the eyes, followed by the pitiful scant tears of utter weakness, showed at last that the faithful servant had awakened to life and remembrance. He tried to rise in his bed, but fell back unequal to the effort. He was too spent to do anything, too spent even for grief. After those few scant tears he shed no more, after that first effort to rise he made no other. Utter prostration forced upon him complete inactivity both of mind and body. During those first few days after my uncle's death, an earthquake would not have aroused Matthew. He lay still; one could scarcely say he rested. It was too negative a state for that.

There was a coroner's inquest. I had to give evidence. We spoke not of it to Matthew, and he asked no single question. On the fourth day my poor uncle was buried. The doctor took all the arrangements off my hands. He was no stranger to me, for it was he who had attended me in my long illness, and at this time he proved himself a kind friend.

I was the one mourner at the funeral. It rained as we stood by the lonely grave, the sky was dreary, there were no flowers. Unwept over, save by me, my uncle was lowered into his last resting-place: and yet, that unattended funeral, that closing scene, took away from me some of the exceeding mournfulness which had before come over me when my thoughts dwelt on my uncle's marred life and tragic end. The words of the service were to me a startling revelation. Never before had I even read them. Some of the sentences struck me as though they had been swords of light.

Standing by that open grave it was borne in upon me that madness, and sin, and disease, were not curses sent by God upon victimized humanity, but *enemies* He would eventually subdue and put under His feet. Day by day He was working towards that end, only asking that man would not frustrate but work with him. We were not to grieve over Lawrence Dillwyn. His poor body sown in dishonour, would be raised in glory; sown in weakness would be raised in power; he would be changed; he would be raised incorruptible, immortal, death swallowed up in victory. No, there was no mournfulness in that service, read at the close of a life like my uncle's: rather was it a beautiful song of triumph and hope. Our brother had been delivered out of the miseries of this sinful world, to have his perfect consummation, and to receive the beautiful kingdom that had been prepared for him from the beginning of the world. This was his pre-

destined fate: the day of madness, the day of the *enemy* had been brought to an end as it were a tale that is told. The marred man would be made perfect, and *comforted for the years wherein he had suffered adversity.*

I went home, my mind full of this last beautiful promise. When Matthew grew a little better I told him of that lonely funeral, and I read aloud to him the parts of the grand service which had most struck me, and together we wept and yet were comforted. Yes, I helped to comfort Matthew; I was glad to think it then, I rejoice over it now. It was strange how our positions had become reversed. Matthew now lay prostrate and helpless, and looked to me for everything; I sat by his bedside, shared the vigils of his other nurse the faithful charwoman, fed him, watched over him, and clasped his hand when he was very low and weary. He turned to me in those days like a helpless child. His poor

eyes would follow me as I moved about the room, brightening up when I approached him, and growing sad when I said good-bye even if only for an hour or so.

Seeing him so attached to me, so dependent on me, the nursing of him became almost a joy. It filled my life for the time, it gave me a sense of usefulness, it made me forget myself. My very grief for Felix grew less acute beneath the burden of my new responsibilities. There was much to see to, much to do, in many ways, for now in earnest was I "Mistress of the Establishment." Everything that had been my uncle's was now mine. He had made no will: it would have been of small use his doing so, he being of unsound mind, but I was the sole relation he left behind him, therefore all his property, they told me, was indisputably mine. I had become a rich woman; how rich I knew not, for all business relating to money was left in abeyance

until Matthew should get well. I did not feel equal to coping with lawyers unsupported by Matthew. Also I was not yet of age by two months, so a little delay mattered not at all.

The invalid was a long time gaining strength; for weeks he did not even rise from his bed. I began at last to think he would never rise from it, but one day I came into his room suddenly after an afternoon walk, and found him dressed and sitting up in an arm-chair near the window. He smiled feebly at me as I entered, enjoying my pleasure and surprise. No words can express my relief. For, so long as he lay in his bed, I was haunted by a dread fear lest he should never get well again, but leave me, as others had done, leave me this time absolutely alone in the world. My heart gave a throb of joy when I saw him sitting there, his white-crested head leaning against a red silk cushion, his dark face flushed with the little excitement of the event. His

devoted friend, the charwoman, had helped him to rise and dress, and neither she nor the invalid had given me a hint of the matter beforehand, so wishful had Matthew been that the sight of him dressed and sitting up should come upon me as a pleasant surprise.

“Why, Matthew, how nice!” I exclaimed. “How delightful to see you sitting up and looking like yourself once more! You don’t know how anxious my heart was whilst you were lying there. One always imagines people may die when one sees them ill in bed; but one does not expect it, it would not seem natural when they are sitting up. I feel quite easy about you now I see you in your arm-chair. How do you feel now that you are up?”

“I feel rather weak, I must say, Madam,” answered Matthew; tears of weakness, and perhaps also of sadness, filling his eyes as he spoke.

I pretended not to notice them. “Here, I shall

open this window a little wider," I said, "and let the glorious sunshine in. It will do you good, and make you realize it is once more spring. April is nearly over, Matthew, proud-pied April. It has put a spirit of youth in everything: the trees are budding, and you are getting well. Now you shall have some tea, and I'll have mine up here with you on this little table to celebrate your recovery. I'll bring it all up myself in five minutes."

"Oh, Madam! Please don't run about so. Let the servants do it. I cannot bear you to tire yourself waiting on me. Why should you wait on Matthew, whose duty it is to wait on you?"

"Now, Matthew, none of that nonsense. I'm your mistress, and my orders are that you submit to be waited on by your mistress. If you make any fuss about it I shall be much hurt."

Thus I scolded Matthew, but in reality I was

quite glad to hear his remonstrances. They showed he was better. For when Matthew let me wait on him without a word, it was a sure sign he was very ill, and not himself at all. We had a cosy tea together, and when it was over the convalescent seemed stronger, and we had our first long talk.

“We must begin thinking about the future a little bit now,” said Matthew—“and, Madam—there is something I feel it my duty to say.”

“Say away, Matthew.”

“I am an old man, Madam, my life is practically over. I have almost worn it out in the service of my poor dear master. I am recovering, but I feel as if I could never get up again to quite what I was before this illness. I feel as if my capacity for work were gone. It is not right that a young thing like you should be saddled with the care of an old man who, in a few years, will be quite unfit for work. So, Madam,

you must replace me with someone younger and more capable. I will find someone for you —when I get a bit stronger. And then I will go into a home, or something of that sort; there are institutions of that kind, I believe, where old men are taken care of. And perhaps, sometimes, dear Madam, you'll come and see old Matthew —and cheer him up with a sight of your dear beautiful young face, and talk to him of old days, —and of the poor master" —here the old man broke down, weeping.

I burst out sobbing also, on the other side of the tea-table.

"Matthew, Matthew! how can you?" I cried. "Why, I have no one left in the world to take care of me but you. Think, just think how desolate I should be without you. And do you think that I have no heart in my bosom? Do you think I would let you go into a home? into a charitable institution? for that is what you

mean, I suppose. Perhaps you meant the workhouse—you, Matthew, *you!* who have spent your life in devoted service to my family. I should never know an instant's happiness, for thinking of you in such a place. You shall go into no institution in England, workhouse or otherwise. No, Matthew. Like me, you have no relations living: we are essential to each other. You will stay with me. I am your sacred charge: you said so once. Now you have also become mine. My uncle gave you to me with his dying breath. What matters it whether you be fit for hard work or not? You will never have to do it. Not as my servant, but as my friend, you remain with me. Someone else shall do that rubbishy old pantry business. You will be simply my—my confidential man! Yes, that's a good idea. My confidential man. As my confidential man you will be invaluable. What do I know of business or money? Why! I should be cheated right and

left. I can't even write a business letter. Oh, there will be heaps for you to do! I shall have to give you a very large salary to repay you for all you will have to do for me. Three hundred a year, will that do, Matthew? Or say the word and I'll make it four—five—six hundred?" I dried my eyes, and looked up at him questioningly.

The old man was still weeping and could not answer me.

"That is settled then," I said, "you will remain with me as my confidential man at a salary of six hundred a year—to be increased as you go on. Don't weep so, dear Matthew. You have known much sorrow, your terrible life has nearly worn you out. I know it: Rosamund knows it. But there are happier times coming. Your life shall be made brighter to you now. It shall be like the full star that ushers in the even. Indeed you shall not find me a troublesome charge. I know a little time back you had fears for me,

Matthew, you feared lest my mind should become unhinged like my poor uncle's. But you need never fear that again. I gave way, and was morbid, that was all. But perhaps I should not say 'that was all,' for I was very wicked also. Oh, very wicked! you don't know what dreadful thoughts I had! But that is over now. I will never give way so again. I am not afraid of madness any longer. I don't think you need fear misery through me, Matthew. So will you stay with me? You must let me know. Will you stay with me, or leave me desolate, quite alone in the world. Answer me, Matthew."

I had risen and was now standing by him, holding his hand.

"Madam, I will stay with you," answered Matthew, lifting his streaming eyes to mine. "I will stay with you and be yours until I die. Never mind the big salary, but God bless you for loving old Matthew."

Thus Matthew became my confidential man.

We spent that summer at the castle. There was much business to be seen to, so my confidential man was not idle. One or two families called on me that summer. I returned their calls, and, later on, went to one or two "At Homes" at their houses, but our acquaintanceship did not grow into intimacy. Somehow I did not take to these people. I had never mixed in any society, still I had my own ideas of what ladies and gentlemen ought to be, and my new acquaintances did not come up to this standard. There was no lady amongst those I met who impressed me with a sense of gentle ladyhood, as the loved one had done even in the uncritical days of childhood. There was no gentleman who impressed me as Felix had done, with a sense of security. Security that no careless unguarded speech or act of mine would ever be taken advantage of in an ungentlemanly manner. It

was dangerous to be free with them, that was how I always felt. In a certain sense they were inferior even to D'Arcy Leigh, for whilst they gave evidences of possessing his mind, they certainly had not his manners.

"Very third-rate people," Matthew said scornfully, when I discussed my new acquaintances with him. "The best people would not rush at you like that, without any excuse, directly you became an heiress. Most third-rate people. Stand on your dignity with them, Madam."

So I stood on my dignity with them, and soon they ceased to send me invitations. Afterwards, I learnt through Anne Gillotson that Miss Gwynne was considered, in that particular circle, a proud, stuck-up young thing, who thought no one good enough for her.

Later in the year, when the winter drew on, and drizzling rains fell, and white fogs stole over the common, imprisoning me in my lonely home,

I began to feel sorry I had stood on my dignity. None of the best people called. There were times when, in my loneliness, I thought friends not to my liking would be better than no friends at all, My life was so very barren and empty. I felt it more and more as time went on. Just at first, after my poor uncle's death, Matthew's illness had fully absorbed and occupied me. Then there had been business to interest me, and all the interviews and discussions attendant thereupon. The change in my position and in the daily conduct of life at the castle also had a bracing effect upon me for a time, giving me a sense of responsibility and of importance which was both new and pleasant. Bright summer sunshine also helped the days to pass, and my friends the swifts fled with the summer, and change glided with imperceptible steps back into monotony. There was only Matthew left, Matthew and books; and, dearly though I loved old Matthew, and greatly though

I loved reading, it was not enough to fill my life. I tried to find fresh interests, with strangely small success. To give an instance: thinking that, perhaps, by being charitable and doing good I might attain a more contented state of mind, I conceived the idea of giving away money every morning from nine-thirty until ten at the back door. I thought the plan worked well myself. The poor soon got wind of it, and came up in troops to receive my alms, and many and various were the blessing called down upon my head. All the poor creatures had sick husbands, or wives, or parents, or babies at home, for whom they were unable to provide, times being so bad, coals and food so dear, and work so slack. Most deserving objects of charity all of them, so thought I; Matthew thought differently. From the first he set his face steadily against this almsgiving. He said I was making my house the resort of every worthless beggar and tramp in the neigh-

bourhood, and that, far from doing good, I was only helping to fill the public houses. He said also that the clergy were getting wild because I was pauperizing the neighbourhood, and many once industrious men had given up work, finding it pleasanter to get money by simply walking up to my back door.

Notwithstanding the cold water thus thrown upon my efforts I persisted in them for some time. But one day two clergymen called, looking very important, and in a manner which I thought impertinently familiar took me to task on the subject of what they called my "indiscriminate and misapplied charity." They alluded to my youth and inexperience, told me I was demoralizing numbers of the working men, and that my pernicious system of almsgiving had been commented on most unfavourably by the respectable inhabitants, from whom I so pointedly kept aloof, then followed up their remonstrances by a proposal, that I should

place all money I wished to give away in their hands for judicious distribution amongst the really poor and deserving.

With a flaming face I told them I preferred to give away my own money myself, thanked them for so kindly interesting themselves in my private affairs, and offered them tea. They declined the tea and began to look uncomfortable, for my manner was decidedly haughty. We had a few minutes more conversation; they tried one more feeble remonstrance, I stuck to the weather. Then they took their leave, stumbling out of the room as though quite abashed before me.

Matthew was at first madly indignant when I told him of the lecture I had received, but when he saw how deeply I had been mortified by my visitors, he calmed down, and said they were only curates, and nobody ever minded curates; if they had been vicars it might have been different. I did not mind the curates, but the possibility that there

might be some truth in what they had said took away from me all further desire to persist in my almsgiving. The beggars were sent away empty-handed by Matthew next morning, and from what I could gather, this task was made neither easy nor pleasant to him. It was a little hard on the poor things to be so disappointed, no doubt.

Next I tried to find out my old companions-of-the-bedchamber, thinking that perhaps my money might help to sweeten their lives. I wrote to Isabel Sturgeon, the only one whose home address I knew. No answer to my letter ever arrived. Lost to me now was every loved friend of the early days. Those whom the pall of death did not cover had wandered into the dark realms of silence.

CHAPTER II.

THIS last failure had a most painful effect upon my mind. I began to think that every door leading to improvement of life was barred to me. Nowhere could I see any outlet for my affections or my energies. The thought of the long empty future stretching before me began to weigh on me like a nightmare. On Christmas Day I broke down in the midst of my solitary dinner.

“You can take the plum pudding away, Matthew,” I said, pushing the dish aside with a sob. “Why should I even try to celebrate Christmas? It is a happy time, no doubt, for young people who have full homes, and loving brothers and sisters, and—

mothers,—but for me,—for me, Matthew, sitting here alone, it is a mere name. Never mention Christmas to me again. In future let the day pass like other days.”

Matthew was standing behind my chair, according to invariable custom. He said it was one of the duties of a confidential man; and, though I had insisted on having a new butler, a female this time, to take all tiresome work off his hands, he never would let her wait upon me at dinner.

“Dear Madam, don’t be so depressed,” he said anxiously, “there may be many, many happy Christmases in store for you yet.”

“No, never!” I cried. “Just think of me, Matthew; what have I got to make Christmas happy? Only these flowers you ordered for me to wear to-day, pansies and rosemary, thoughts and remembrances. And I see no prospect of change, no break in the clouds, no glimpse of the Eastern Star. The voyage of my life is now bound in

shallows. No nice people call or seem to care to know me, the clergy don't like me to be charitable, my schoolfellows, my dear old companions-of-the-bedchamber have passed away into silence. When you are gone I shall just be the thing a girl most dreads to be: the snuff of younger spirits, a lonely, disappointed old maid."

"But, Madam, to contemplate all this at your age is surely premature. You need not be an old maid. There are many nice good young men in the world; gentlemen, real gentlemen I mean; and with your unusual personal attractions"—

I interrupted him, flushing hotly. "I shall never marry, Matthew. I know I have brought my loneliness upon myself, but that is just what makes it so hard to bear. And it is vain to hope it can ever be otherwise. Do you remember your last words to me before you took poor uncle away to Shropshire? You told me that if I did a certain cruel thing, upon me would be

laid the punishing hand of God. I did that cruel thing, and the punishing hand was laid upon me. It is laid upon me still: I feel it in little things. That is why I cannot get out of the shallows, why I shall be bound in them all my life. I try to submit, indeed I do, but, oh, if I could only have Felix back! You see I have lost my mate, Matthew, I have lost my mate."

It was the cry of my heart, the cry of my very soul. I had pent it in for a long time, but it was forced from me this lonely Christmas Day. Matthew did then what he very rarely did: he took a chair and sat down by my side at the dinner table.

"Madam," he said, "I am glad you have broken through your reserve on this point. Now, may I talk freely to you? Shall old Matthew say all that is in his mind?"

"Yes, Matthew, talk to me as if I were your child."

“I will, my dear. Now, Madam, God once gave you a precious gift, the most precious of all gifts. He gave a human heart into your keeping. You trifled with that heart, you tortured it. You proved yourself unworthy of it. So God took it away again. In that way only was the punishing hand laid upon you. Now He who took away can restore. There lies hope. You must make yourself worthy of the love that was taken away from you, then it may be restored to you. You have already begun; I see a great change in you. I don't think if that poor heart were given back to you, it would ever be tortured more. Only go on as you have begun, and the very best may happen. Think always of poor Mr. Felix's sweet, gentle, noble nature, and strive to make yours the same. Then, however far from you he may be, you will yet be drawing nearer to him.”

“Oh, I will! I will!” I cried, weeping great

relieving tears at the thought that somewhere there still lay hope. "I will try daily to grow more like Felix, I am glad you gave me the thought. I shall feel now when I try to be good that it is Orpheus with his lute drawing me towards him over the mountains. I don't know what made me so wicked in past days. There was something within me that prompted me to it all. Something wild I could not tame. It made me impatient, it made me mocking, it made me cruel. It drove me to that horrid man. I feel it still occasionally. What is it, Matthew? Can it be an evil spirit, or some dreadful hereditary thing?"

"Certainly not," answered Matthew, almost sharply.

"Then what is it?"

Matthew looked about him as if searching for an idea. "I should say—I should say"—he began hesitatingly, then the idea he wanted seemed

to come to him. "It is original sin," he said decidedly. "We've all got it, any clergyman could tell you that, so you need not be distressed about it, Madam."

"But what is original sin? Why have I got it? How am I to get rid of it?"

"Well, Madam, the subject is a puzzling one. My religious education has been a little neglected, and somehow the duties of my life have always been so pressing, I have had no time to trouble about doctrines. So what original sin was originally I can't say. But in *your* case, Madam I should say it was the natural faults of your character which must and can be corrected. That is what I should say about it in your case."

"I know, I know," I said sadly. "Felix and I talked of these faults of mine once. Oh, what a lifetime ago it seems! I promised to try and correct them for his sake, but they are still as rampant in me as ever. I have no patience, no

powers of endurance, no stability. If I had only striven to correct these faults years ago, what misery might have been averted. But it is not too late! Oh, say it is not too late!”

“No, Madam, it is never too late. Besides you have done much already. You did much when I fell ill and you so tenderly nursed me. I scarcely like to tell you how highly I thought of my dear mistress then.”

“Oh, Matthew!” I cried, blushing for gladness at his words. “It was but little I did, and now it seems as if I could do nothing.”

“Well, Madam, there are times in our lives when it does seem as if we could do nothing. We are ‘bound in shallows’ as you were saying. But we can always *be*. Be the best and highest we are capable of. Begin at once to correct these faults of which you speak, Madam, and though happiness may be slow in returning to you, depend on it, it will come at last.”

“Matthew, I feel now it is Christmas Day. You have pointed to a break in the clouds, you have shown me the Eastern Star. You have given me back hope. Almost I can hear the lute of Orpheus calling me far away over the mountains. Oh, I must follow, must follow.”

Matthew started. A new idea had struck him. But he did not tell it me; not that Christmas evening.

Some days afterwards I found out what the new idea of my confidential man had been. He sprang it upon me suddenly when he was buttoning my boots, preparatory to my taking a walk.

“Madam,” he said, “I don’t know how it is, but I still feel very weak. I have never quite shaken off the effects of my illness last spring.”

“I am so sorry,” I said, feeling distressed, for it was not often Matthew complained. “I thought you were getting yourself again. What shall we do? I wonder if there is any medicine that would strengthen you.”

"No, Madam, no medicine will strengthen me. What I want is change—change of scene, change of climate, amusement; in fact, Madam, I feel that the only thing that can be of any real benefit to me is foreign travel."

"Foreign travel!" I exclaimed, staring at Matthew's bent head in astonishment.

"Yes, Madam," he answered, buttoning away furiously and doing it all wrong. "Foreign travel. I want distraction, I want to see the world, I find it dull at the castle."

I was silent from sheer amazement. Was my confidential man getting skittish in his old age? If so, what on earth should I do?"

"I was thinking, Madam," went on Matthew without looking up at me, "that it would be very easy to dismiss the servants, dismantle the rooms, send the plate to the bank, and leave the house in the care of the charwoman."

"But where am I to go?" I asked, quite taken aback.

"We could then, Madam, go abroad together. I really do not feel equal to going alone. We might go next month. Catch the club train—the 3 P.M. from Victoria. Follow—go that way, I mean."

"Oh, yes, yes—very nice!" I gasped, suddenly understanding the good creature.

"We could visit all the foreign cities, Madam, stay at the large hotels where the visitors from England congregate; go to all places where there is music, where we should be likely to meet nice musical people that would be congenial to you. Because, of course, though you would be travelling for the benefit of my health, there is no reason why you should not enjoy yourself as much as possible."

"Oh, no, of course not," I answered, trembling all over with excitement. So startling an idea had never once occurred to me. To go by the club train, the 3 P.M. from Victoria. To follow

—no, not follow. Nothing undignified, nothing that savoured of pursuit. To travel for the benefit of Matthew's health. To go where there was music, that I might enjoy myself. My blood rushed through my veins, my cheeks and ears tingled, my heart leapt as I thought of it. Once away from the castle my life would be lifted out of the shallows that had bound it so long. All manner of things might happen. Possibilities were infinite."

"We'll go, we'll go!" I cried. "Matthew, I shall bless you for ever for thinking of it, for needing it for your health, I mean. We'll start to-morrow. Never mind my boots, leave the top buttons unfastened, they are of no importance. Let's go and dismiss the servants and dismantle the rooms. Send the barouche for the charwoman at once, and let the coachman leave the plate at the bank on the way."

Matthew declined to do things so rapidly. From

a confidential point of view he was perfection, but he was not expeditious. He liked to deliberate, and think about things before he did them, and in this instance he took a whole fortnight over what I could have done in a day.

However, we got off at last. On the eighteenth of January we left the castle. It is strange how unconsciously we attach ourselves to places. I had ever been miserable in my home on Wildacre Common, yet, as Matthew and I drove away from it, tears sprang to my eyes as though I were leaving a dear friend. The honeysuckle porch seemed to teem with memories as I looked back upon it. There my uncle had stood many and many a time basking in the sunshine, with his hands beneath his coat tails; there Felix had over and over again taken leave of me. From that porch I had watched him in the summer evenings, going back to his dingy lodgings, where he worked to make me a home. And now—

my uncle had become a spirit; Felix a dream.

I turned to Matthew, who sat by my side. He, too, was looking back, and tears were flowing fast down his cheeks. The castle had been his home longer than it had been mine. No doubt he, too, had visions of the poor master basking in the sunshine with his hands beneath his coat-tails, ay, and countless visions of days of long ago, vanished days when he and his master had been young together with no thought of the dark shadow that was to fall later.

"We are leaving home behind us, Matthew," I said, with a touch of mournfulness.

"Yes, Madam. Forgive my weakness. I feel for a moment as Hagar must have felt when the door of her home closed behind her, and before her lay the wilderness of Beersheba."

"Oh, Matthew! we'll not go on if you feel like that. I should not have allowed you to uproot yourself at your age. We will turn back."

“Dear Madam, no. The weakness will pass. I mean to enjoy myself vastly. We shall find water in the wilderness, and *please God, for you it shall blossom like the rose.*”

We caught the club train, the 3 P.M. from Victoria, and we went first to Cannes. Matthew had ascertained that the Riviera was the place most resorted to by English people at this time of the year and that Cannes was considered select, the sort of place a fastidious old lady would choose, therefore was Cannes the first point chosen. The hotel we first went to was the *Prince de Galles*. We only stayed a week at this hotel, and Matthew was in close attendance upon me most of the time, yet, whilst I stayed there, the gentleman who occupied the seat next mine at the table d'hôte, managed to make me an offer of his heart and hand. His presumption in imagining I could, under any circumstances, give myself to a man I had known so short a

time angered me exceedingly, but Matthew said that sort of thing was to be expected when I travelled, and that I must not mind. So I tried not to mind; but though "that sort of thing" happened very often during my travels, I never became hardened to it, and always thought it insulting.

From the *Prince de Galles* we went to the *Mont Fleuri*, and thence to every hotel in Cannes, staying in each a few days, and carefully examining the visitors' book in all. Nowhere could we find what we wanted; each hotel was an unacknowledged failure. All Cannes was disappointing.

We left Cannes. Then we tried Nice, Monte Carlo, Mentone, in fact, every place along the Riviera.

The whole Riviera was disappointing. Not in point of beauty; there it surpassed my expectations. My fingers itch to describe some of the exquisite views that unfolded themselves as we

passed along. The peeps of blue Mediterranean, the divine sunsets behind the dreamlike Esterel Mountains, the sapphire bays with the white sea-birds floating over the water, the palmed and aloed terraces, the violet islands, the glistening, gold-balled orange groves, the sweet inland roads with their borders of graceful acacia, and lovely golden mimosa. Scarcely can I refrain from dwelling at length on these, so deep is my love, so keen my remembrance of things beautiful. But time passes, and I must be getting on with my story.

We left the Riviera. Our journeying there, which began with so much bright hope, ended in dull disappointment. The very loveliness made my heart ache at last. The brilliant sunshine overpowered me. I yearned for refreshing breezes, and sweet dark cloud shadows, for "water in the wilderness."

"We'll go away," I said at length to Matthew, "it is all arid here."

But the aridness was in my heart, and wherever I went I bore it with me. We visited next, "all the places where there is music," in other words we went to every place we could hear of as being musical, or likely to be frequented by musical people. Dresden, Leipzig, Bayreuth, Hanover, Munich, Vienna, all were visited in turn. I think during the three years wandering that followed, Matthew and I paced the streets of half the cities in Europe. We did our best to enjoy the wandering. Much that was beautiful, much that was deeply interesting did we see. Our minds were opened, our tastes cultivated; but despite all this there was secret disappointment in our hearts from first to last, and aridness everywhere. Never once did we acknowledge we sought Felix, though each knew the other was seeking him. Wherever we went, were it picture-gallery, opera-house, museum, concert-hall, or promenade, our eyes eagerly scanned the sea

of faces around us in hope they might at last fall upon the long-lost, once familiar face. But when that hope faded, as it did daily, we never said: "He is not here." And when we walked about the streets, perpetually would our eyes roam about, searching, searching; but for three long years we never once said: "It is in vain."

We made a good many acquaintances during all this journeying, but no friends. You must give your confidence when you wish to make a friend; I could open my heart to no one. Naturally we excited much comment, Matthew and I. People seemed never weary of discussing us, and, whenever we entered a room, in a little time we found ourselves the centre of observation. Very amusing were the conjectures Matthew overheard, concerning our relations to one another. He was generally either my eccentric old husband, my poor relation, or my courier; I was all things, from a runaway ward in chancery to a

tired Newnham girl. Once for a whole day I unconsciously passed as a Maharanee then known to be travelling on the continent, and Matthew as the Maharajah. It was thought odd the Maharajah should stand behind the Maharanee's chair at meal times, but it passed as Indian etiquette. How they accounted for my fair complexion I know not, but Matthew did not look unlike an Eastern gentleman, and was rather pleased by the mistake. I could always make him smile after that day by calling him "Maharajah."

CHAPTER III.

WE grew weary of the wandering at last. Hope deserted me, and Matthew's face began to show plainly that such long-continued travelling was too much for him. One day, in Florence, I broke down.

"Let us go back to England," I said, and then, for the first time since we had set foot on foreign soil, I sobbed out to Matthew that all our journeying had been in vain.

For some moments Matthew could say nothing, only stood looking at me with a distressed face. Then a thought seemed to strike him. He took a roll of photographs off the sitting-room table,

and therefrom handed one to me. It was the photograph of a picture we had seen the day before in the Uffizi Gallery, called "La Fortezza," or "Fortitude," by Botticelli, an allegorical figure which had greatly struck both Matthew and me. It represented a young woman seated on a massive chair almost like a throne. She was clad partly in armour, partly in draperies, and bore a heavy mace in hands that grasped firmly, albeit a little strained by the weight they bore. All was wonderfully rendered, but it was the face that had most struck us. As I gazed at it now I saw the face of one who had borne sorrow patiently from time immemorial, and who knew she would have to bear it for all time to come. Not a trace of weakness or repining, no worn or haggard lines, not the mark of a tear. The eyes suggested hopelessness, and yet were calm, the brow beneath the drooping jewels was serene and clear, the mouth was compressed like that

of one who endures, yet sweet, and scarcely sad. No more marvellous picture is to be seen in all Italy, for it breathes the very spirit of that which it was intended to represent. Fortitude itself is there.

“Next to Fidelity, Madam, the grandest virtue in the world,” remarked Matthew, when I had gazed at it a moment or two. Then he added—“Many a time has your young face looked like hers, and I honour my dear mistress for the fortitude with which she has borne the daily disappointments of years.”

I flushed up with a gratification at the praise, that almost amounted to pleasure. Perpetual had been my effort to be brave and cheerful during my wandering, and not to sadden Matthew by any repining, but the effort was now repaid by his recognition of it.

“She has reached the summit,” I said, pointing to the photograph, “I wish I were more like her. I am still only climbing.”

“Well, Madam, all honour to those who climb. You may not be intended to reach that throne, and to sit in the seat of endurance for ever.”

We went back to England for my twenty-fifth birthday. I shrank from going back to the empty memory-haunted house on the Common, so we resolved to make our home for a time at the *Marine Hotel*, Exbourne. Matthew left me there and ran down to Wildacre himself for a day or two, just to see how things were going on there. He returned in time for my birthday. We spent it in going over all my childish haunts together, and, so vividly did old times come before me as we paced up and down the beach, and passed the dear old confectioner's shop in the High Street, that I could keep silence on the subject nearest my heart no longer. All reserve concerning Felix broke down completely then between Matthew and me. I poured out my heart to him; I showed him every place I had ever visited with

my lover; all day long we talked of old times and of Felix. The outpouring did me good. Nothing is so painful to an impulsive nature as self-repression, and I had repressed my inmost self for years. I was far happier now I found it possible to talk freely to Matthew of all the tender memories of Felix stored up in my heart.

Exbourne had changed a good deal with the years. It had grown much larger, and poor Miss Skinner's garden was gone. A gravelled space with a grass-plot in the centre was all I saw, when I stood in the white road, and gazed yearningly over the familiar little green gate. I shed a few tears over the loss of that little strip of flower-beds,—Miss Skinner had loved it so.

“Here we used to work in the afternoons,” I said to Matthew, who was looking over the gate with me. “Felix, and Miss Skinner, and I. And in that window to the right the poor invalid brother used to sit, and from it he saw the crocuses

blossom, just before he died. And there to the left is Felix's garden. It is still laid out in just the same old way, but it is not nearly so full of blossom as in the dear old days. It looks neglected, and the house has a most deserted air. See! It is 'To be Let.' Do you see the board over there amongst the trees, near that great window? 'To be Let' on it in large white letters. Oh, what changes! Felix's old home to be let, Miss Skinner's garden gone, and she lying in her quiet grave; my uncle dead; Felix, we know not where. You and I alone in the world, Matthew, resting our weary feet here after years of wandering. I feel now that it is a good thing the future is hid from us. I feel as King Henry IV. did, that if we could read the book of fate, and see how chances mock and changes fill the cup of alteration, the happiest youth would shut the book and lay him down and die. It is not good for me to be looking in here. La Fortezza feels

the mace too heavy. Turn this way, look at the sweet downs, they are unchanged. The same cloud-shadows are racing each other over the same sun-lit turf. Oh, how I yearned for those cloud-shadows on the Riviera! I suppose, Matthew, it would be of no use to make any inquiries at those two houses behind us?"

"None whatever, Madam. I wrote and made inquiries long ago. Miss Skinner's successors could give me no information. Mr. Felix's old home has passed into several hands since Mrs. Vaughan-Price rented it. The agents themselves know nothing of their former tenants."

I sighed. Not that I had entertained any hope. Hope and I had parted long ago. "I have often wondered, Matthew," I said, "how I came to be sent to Miss Skinner's poor little obscure school."

"The answer is very simple, Madam. Miss Skinner was known in her young days to the Dillwyn family, and when she started the school

she sent a prospectus to my poor dear master, asking him to help her if he could. He was mightily pleased at getting the prospectus, and, when you were left to his charge, nothing would please him but to send you to Miss Skinner's school."

"So all the joys and sorrows of my girlhood are due to the fact that Miss Skinner sent a prospectus to my uncle. Upon what little chances our lives hang, Matthew! If I had been sent anywhere else, I should not have met Felix, should not have loved, should not have lost—oh! I would I had never gone to this school——"

"Dear Madam," interrupted Matthew, "come away from this place, I see it is too much for you. Let us come back to the hotel; a cup of tea will cheer you up."

"Very well, Matthew," I answered, trying to swallow down my tears and speak bravely. Then I turned again to take one last look at Felix's garden before going away.

Someone else was leaning over the little green gate now. A forlorn looking girl dressed in shabby black, with shoes down at heel, and a quantity of light brown hair knotted loosely under an old fashioned hat. Not a beautiful object, yet the figure interested me. I felt sure if I could see the face its expression would be wistful and a little weary; the lines of the figure, in some indefinable way, told me so. Why was she standing there at the old little green gate, looking wistfully in at Felix's garden, and the spot where poor Miss Skinner's flowers once had bloomed? Had she know them long ago? Was she thinking painfully of life's changes, as I had been doing? Matthew stood waiting for me, but I could not move. I felt slightly agitated, that lovely knotted light brown hair seemed to stir some long-ago remembrance.

The girl turned. Oh, strange chance! Oh, sudden great delight! I saw a face from the

vanished past. A friend had come back from the far-away happy days of childhood. I had found one of the many things I had lost. Before me stood one who for years had slept, worked, and played by my side, one who had shared my childish secrets, and sympathized with my childish sorrows, one who had known and loved Felix. There was no possibility of mistake: the figure had grown and developed, the face had sharpened a little, but I should have known anywhere my dear favourite companion-of-the-bedchamber.

“Isabel, Isabel!” I cried, and held out my hand to her, for my knees trembled so I could not approach her.

She stood and stared at me, first blankly, then with slow-dawning recognition. Half timidly, half eagerly, she came up to me.

“It is—is it Rosamund?” she asked hesitatingly.

“Yes, of course it is Rosamund, your old friend and schoolfellow Rosamund. Kiss me, Isabel:

don't you recognise me? Are you not sure of me?"

She hung back bashfully. "You've grown so grand," she said. "I can hardly believe it's little Rosamund that used to go so shabby."

I saw she was shy, so I took her hand and drew her with me to the little green gate, and we looked over it together.

"Years have passed, Isabel, since we lived in that house together," I said. "I was a very poor, lonely little girl, and you were very good to me. I am rich now, but I am still the same lonely Rosamund, and many's the time I've longed to see my old playmates, my dear old companions-of-the-bedchamber. Do you remember once when I was very miserable you all collected a shilling for me, gave me a fortnight's pocket-money, so that I might be comforted by a Shakspeare while you were away? You presented me with the money and made the speech; do you remember, Isabel?"

"Yes, I remember it," she answered, beginning to cry.

"I have that Shakspeare now; it is one of my greatest treasures, and I have always hoped I might some day come across the kind-hearted givers and do something for them in return. At last I have done so; I have found you, Isabel, and I will not lose you again. I wrote to you at your home three or four years ago, why did you never answer my letter?"

"I never had it. My home broke up six years ago."

"And where have you been ever since?"

"In different places, teaching, at first; but they want languages now and all kinds of advanced things, even in the poorest schools and for the meanest salaries—so now—now, Rosamund, I've sunk a bit from teaching and I'm only a poor dressmaker, not fit to be the friend of a fine lady like you."

"Are you very poor, dear Isabel?"

“Very,” she answered, sobbing bitterly now. “We’ve set up here, Joanna Buckley and me, she’s sunk from the teaching too. You’ll remember Joanna?—She slept in the next bed but one to you. But we don’t succeed somehow, even in the dressmaking, and Joanna’s getting quite ill. She never could bear much, you remember; she used to cry over her chilblains in the cold weather when none of the rest of the girls were minding them. She cries just the same now over the scant food and the hardships. Last winter it was dreadful. She’s not so strong to bear it as I am——”

I interrupted her abruptly. “You shall neither of you have to bear any more hardships whilst I am alive,” I said, my face crimsoning with pity. “Now, Isabel, you are coming back with me to the *Marine Hotel*, to dine and spend the evening.”

She looked at me in amazed delight, the tears suspended on her eyelashes. Then she said

naïvely: "It would be a bit hard on Joanna to be left out of such a treat as that."

"Joanna is to come too," I said. "Matthew, this is Miss Isabel Sturgeon, my old schoolfellow. You have often heard me speak of her. And, Isabel, this is Mr. Primavesi, my most trusted friend. Isn't it delightful to have found her, Matthew?"

"It is indeed, Madam," said Matthew bowing, and smiling broadly.

"All my old friends will turn up now, perhaps. There is another in Exbourne I want you to find and bring to me. What is her address, Isabel?—120, Sea-Side Row—Then, Matthew, please go there at once, take a cab, and ask for Miss Joanna Buckley. Tell her an old friend wishes to see her, and bring her back in the cab to the *Marine Hotel*."

"Say 'To dine and spend the evening'," put in Isabel, eagerly, "she'll be so excited then. Oh, I'd like to see Joanna when she gets that message!

The *Marine Hotel*! such a grand place! Oh, please, Rosamund, may the gentleman say that I am already at the hotel, it will make her feel more at home about coming?"

"Certainly. Please, Matthew, say Miss Isabel Sturgeon is already at the hotel with the old friend, but don't mention my name on any account, we will let that be a surprise for Joanna."

Beaming all over with sympathetic delight Matthew hurried away, to find and bring to me a second long-lost friend.

In a pretty sitting-room facing the sea, in the *Marine Hotel*, Isabel and I awaited the arrival of Joanna. Tea was spread on a little table by the window, for dinner could not take place for an hour or two. Isabel had got over her first awe of me, and was chatting away freely.

"I do hope Joanna will put on her best dress," she said. "Luckily I had on mine, because I'd just taken some blouses home to a lady."

Poor Isabel! I hardly dared look at her best frock, for fear she should see the pity in my eyes. It was so very worn and shabby.

"There she comes! There she comes!" almost screamed Isabel from her post by the window. "She's got on her best frock too. We always wear black for best; it looks genteel-like, even when it's shabby. She looks quite grand driving. Now you stand here, Rosamund, right in the middle of the room. Oh, you do look so lovely in that white dress, and so simply as it is made, too! Now, I'll hide in this corner and I'll just watch Joanna. She'll be worth watching when she sees you."

The door opened. Matthew, still beaming, ushered in Joanna, then went out again and left me with my girl companions. Had I not been prepared for Joanna's advent I should have had some difficulty in recognising her. She looked as if she had worked hard and cried daily for

years. Seeing her I began to realize what the two poor girls must have gone through. Isabel had been stronger to bear, and had not shown such deep traces of her hard life.

“Do you know me, Joanna?” I asked gently.

No, she did not know me. She only stood still and stared at me in painful embarrassment. Isabel rushed out from her corner, unable to remain there silently an instant longer.

“Joanna’s gone dreadfully short-sighted with so much sewing and cry—and one thing and another,” she said apologetically. “Come nearer, Joanna, look at that golden hair; who do you remember long ago that had bright, bright gold hair like that?”

Joanna advanced under the protection of her friend, and peered up at me. She knew me then.

“Oh, I know!” she cried in a startled way—“it’s Rosamund! Exactly the same face, only she’s different. I hope you are quite well, Miss. Is it to take an order, Isabel?”

The poor girl was so nervous I really don't think she knew what she was saying. Both girls seemed a little afraid of me in the beginning, which vexed me somewhat. I kissed Joanna affectionately, and tried to make her talk, but at first she only replied in monosyllables, blushing painfully the while. I remembered that Matthew had once said I bore myself very proudly. The habit of holding myself very erect, had no doubt grown upon me during my years of hotel life, for to carry my head high had seemed a kind of protection against undesirable acquaintances and lovers. Perhaps these girls noticed it, and thought that Rosamund, in spite of her delight at meeting them, might yet be a little proud. Thinking this, I sat down, and made the girls sit near me, and I bent my head over the tea-appendages, and tried to look as meek and lowly as possible. By degrees we got more comfortable together. The ice thawed completely when I suddenly

broke into a Shaksperian quotation, and, whilst holding forth, absently put two lumps of sugar into the tea-pot instead of into Joanna's cup. The two girls looked at each other and laughed, and Isabel said:

"That's just like Rosamund," and then we became quite merry and began to enjoy ourselves. The girls examined my dress, which they thought lovely, and took notes of all the newest points to make use of professionally. My handkerchief also struck them greatly. It was a fine one, embroidered, and slightly scented.

"Fancy using things like this every day," said Joanna, peering into the embroidery with her tear-dimmed eyes, "why, I should hardly dare to use it at all. I should only stick it in the front of my dress on Sundays with the corners out to show the embroidery."

"You shall each have one like this to stick in your dress on Sundays" I said; whereat they were mightily pleased.

Then came the question I had been dreading, yet hoping for.

"We've talked a lot about ourselves," said Isabel, "now tell us something about yourself. You don't seem married. How is it you have not married Felix?"

"I know nothing of him," I answered. "I know not if he be alive or dead. Perhaps you can tell me something of him."

I tried to speak naturally, but my voice shook and the colour rushed like a painful flood over my face. The girls looked at me in astonishment for a moment, then, kind-hearted creatures that they were, they averted their eyes.

"Oh, he's alive, alive as a cockle, don't you fear," said Isabel, in a reassuring tone. "Joanna saw him this spring, driving in a cab towards the cemetery here. And what do you think was his errand here?"

For years Felix had been to me as one dead.

To hear of him thus suddenly was almost too great a joy. The room reeled before my eyes, I could not answer Isabel. She had the heart of a lady beneath her shabby frock, and after one quick glance at my face, went on without a reply.

“He was going to put crocuses on Miss Skinner’s grave. She’s buried in the cemetery, you know. Joanna saw the cab was full of crocuses, and remembering they were Miss Skinner’s favourite flowers we guessed where he was taking them. So that evening as soon as work was done we hurried up to the cemetery. There were all the crocuses on the poor thing’s grave; gold, and white, and mauve, and purple, some planted, others scattered, and a lovely huge wreath of them in the middle, you never saw such a show!”

“It was just like Felix to do it,” said Joanna, taking up the story, “he always thought of those kind sorts of things. I tried to speak to him, and called out his name, but there! the cab went

by so quickly he hadn't the chance to see or hear."

"How did he look?" I asked, finding voice at last.

"A bit more broad and manly, perhaps, but much the same, I should say, by the glimpse I had. Clean-shaven still, and hair just as bright and curling as ever. I could see that much in one glance."

Then I put another question; a question that had tormented my heart for years, but to which I had never before given utterance, no, not even to Matthew. "Do you know," I asked tremblingly, "if he has married his cousin—Miss Angharad Vaughan-Price?"

"That he didn't!" cried Isabel, looking in a pleased way at Joanna, "we are in a position to make Rosamund easy about that, aren't we, Joanna?"

"Yes, I'm glad to say we are," replied Joanna, also looking pleased.

“Miss Angharad Vaughan-Price married Sir Hubert Radcliffe,” continued Isabel. “We saw illustrations of the wedding in the *Lady’s Pictorial* when we were having tea once in a friend’s house. It was just a chance we took up the paper, and the name struck us, then we remembered how Miss Skinner used to talk of her, and say the old grandmother intended her for Felix. Old cat! There was no mention of her at the wedding. Arching her disappointed back and spitting at home, I expect.”

Then followed a detailed account of the bride’s and bridesmaids’ dresses. The girls were in their element now. I scarcely heard a word they were saying. My mind was in a state of almost joyful tumult, and my heart felt as if a cold hand that had lain there for years had been suddenly taken away. The sunshine streaming in through the open window seemed to brighten, grow more intense, permeate my very being.

Felix was alive and well. He was unmarried. I felt certain now he was unmarried. Since he had not married his cousin to please his grandmother, he was not likely to have married any other. No, not remembering me. And he did remember me. The past must still be very dear to him, else why had he come to Exbourne to put crocuses on our old friend's grave. Suddenly from having been very far off Felix seemed to grow quite near. In imagination I saw him driving up the hill with the crocus blossoms, standing by Miss Skinner's grave thinking sorrowfully of the past and me, visiting the old haunts, leaning over the little green gate perhaps as I had done that morning, and longing for the old days to come again, the old days before I had tied sharp-toothed unkindness like a vulture to his heart. I could not sit still, so great was my agitation. Rising, I walked restlessly about the room, taking up things absently, and putting

them down again anywhere. The girls stole anxious looks at me, and stopped talking. Dear girls! from the far-away past they had come back to me, bearing good tidings of my long-lost friend.

“Oh, girls, girls!” I cried out impulsively, “if you only knew what I have suffered since Felix and I parted, you would find him and bring him back to me!” Then at sight of their sympathetic, deeply-interested faces all pride and reserve fled away from me. I sat down and poured forth to them the whole sad story.

“I’ll be bound you haven’t suffered more than Felix has,” said Isabel decisively when I had finished.

“No, but, dear girls, don’t you see that that knowledge is just what makes my punishment almost unendurable.”

They were silent for a moment, but I think they understood, for they came and stood on either

side of me, and Isabel put her hand on my shoulder and Joanna stroked my hair. Then Isabel said :

“Look here, Rosamund, you went wrong a bit, there’s no denying that, but I see you’ve a true faithful heart. You’ve been faithful to Felix through all these years, and though you’re a fine lady now, you’re faithful to Joanna and me. And”—she went on impressively—“if by any help of ours, Felix can be brought back to you, we’ll take the oath of it, *he shall be brought.*”

“Amen,” said Joanna fervently.

CHAPTER IV.

THAT night I dreamed that I stood in Felix's garden. It was midnight, but a clear cold radiance was over everything, and I could see the garden was full of blossom. I was alone, absolutely alone; there seemed no other in the world save me. The air was perfectly still, not a leaf moved, not a breath was stirring. It was most dream-like, the dream of a dream. Amidst the trees at the further end of the garden peeped glimpses of something white and cold and glistening, and I knew they were glimpses of the windows of Felix's house. I could not see the house, but I knew that, too, stood absolutely alone,

and was perfectly still and empty. I looked up to see whence the light came, and, lo! overhead in the exquisite midnight blue was a most brilliant star. I seemed to know it, then I remembered it was Charmian's Eastern Star, the star of consolation and hope. It moved as I gazed upon it, moved forward. I followed, drawing nearer and nearer to the glistening windows. Suddenly I felt my way was barred. I looked down. Close in front of me was a great window, one sheet of glass, glistening like a diamond. I strained my eyes to gain a view of what lay behind that diamond window, and presently I saw within, a long empty room that stretched away into darkness, and far away, right across the darkness there shone in large white letters the words "To be Let."

I stretched out my hand, and it passed through the glass like a spirit hand, and stretched away from me until it reached the large white letters

in the darkness at the end, and with one sweep it obliterated them. Then the star passed through the window, and down the great room in front of me, and stood on high in the darkness at the further end. I waited; for I felt a great and wonderful thing was about to happen. Then suddenly the darkness became light, and far, far away I could see Isabel and Joanna coming towards me, robed like angels in dazzling white. Though they were so far away I could see their eyes looking joyfully at me, and instantly I knew they were bringing Felix. I could not see him, but infinitely far away, beyond the light, I could hear him——coming.

Then a great cry broke from me, and I awoke to find it was but a dream. Only a dream. But it gave me an inspiration. Late that morning I lay a-thinking, and the inspiration grew and grew until when at last I arose it had become a settled plan. This plan I unfolded to Matthew whilst he waited upon me at breakfast.

"Matthew," I said, "you have often told me I do not live nearly up to my income; I think I shall begin doing so now."

"Yes, Madam, you will be quite justified."

"You know there was a horrible board up in Felix's garden saying the house was 'To be Let'?"

Matthew stopped short in the act of handing me the buttered toast, and stared at me expectantly.

"Those letters shall be swept away by my hand. I am going to take the house."

"It is a very large house," said Matthew, in great surprise, "far larger than the castle at Wildacre which you have already on your hands. You will find it melancholy, just you and me, surrounded by empty rooms."

"It shall not be just you and me any longer. It is not good for us to live so much to ourselves, we must not settle down to it again. Yet we must settle. The castle is out of the question for me. It will always be associated with tragedy

and misery in my mind. Put the board "To be Let" up there if you will, Matthew, but never expect me to live there. Neither shall I travel any more. I roamed half over Europe to gain tidings of Felix, and gained none. I come back hopelessly to England and, as I told you last night, news of him falls from the clouds to my feet. This has taught me that it is of no use trying to force the hand of God. My wandering feet have been led here, my old companions have been restored to me, I seem to see the way before me now, plain and clear. Here I shall remain—and—and *wait*, Matthew."

"Yes, Madam;—I think you are right. And what is your intention with regard to the house?"

"I shall convert it into a 'Dressmaker's Establishment,' reserving only a suite of rooms for ourselves. The Establishment will consist of six girls, my six companions-of-the-bedchamber. I can find them all out through Isabel. She tells

me not one of them has a happy home; all lead badly-paid lives of drudgery, with nothing to fall back upon in time of sickness, or when old age creeps upon them. It goes to my heart to think of it and compare it with my own life of luxury. They shall not have their young lives made miserable to them any longer, no, nor have to dread that worst of horrors, an unregarded age in corners thrown. I won't pauperize them. They shall be given a nice house to live in, a pretty garden to amuse themselves in, good food and clothing—and—well, I think that shall be all. They shall work for their luxuries. Only when they are ill, or when they grow old, will I provide for them entirely. Surely the clergy won't object to this charity, Matthew?"

"I don't think you need dread interference from the clergy here, Madam. They are much too busy with their high fandangoes. But, if I were you, I'd just let the girls work for their

clothes. Include the clothes as luxuries, else the young things might grow idle and gossipy, and get into mischief."

"Very well. Clothes shall be considered luxuries, not necessities. They shall work for their clothes. We must make their recreation room very attractive; books, pictures, pianos, all sorts of pretty refining things. And, Matthew, there are nice stables, I think a couple of pony carriages to take them out if their poor eyes get weak from sewing—"

"I really think, Madam, pony carriages might excite the clergy. We must be wary and do things moderately just at first. Of course for your own use——"

"Oh, never mind myself. We'll take cabs then just at first, if the girls want airings. Nice open cabs. Now this morning, Matthew, go and see the agent about the house. But if there's a curate there say you will call again. It will be best to be wary, no doubt."

The house was taken. The six girls were then collected and installed in it. I took up my abode in a suite of rooms on the ground floor, in the character of President of the Establishment. Happily and bravely the good work went on. With Matthew's help I superintended the whole Establishment. Our old friend the charwoman, and her daughter, were engaged to do the cooking and cleaning for the girls, and Matthew insisted on my engaging two servants to wait solely upon me in my rooms, but we all seemed to amalgamate a good deal as time went on, and often the charwoman had to tie on my veil and lace up my shoes whilst my servants were busy doing odd jobs for the girls.

We were very wary, and did not advertise ourselves much. Of course keeping the affair quiet was disadvantageous from a business point of view, but we obtained a few orders from ladies, and we made clothes for the poor, which I bought

of the Establishment, and distributed early in the morning before the curates were about.

To our great surprise, after a first trial, the orders from ladies ceased. Matthew shook his head over this, and suggested it might be as well to teach the Establishment its profession. So another old friend, Anne Gillotson, the dressmaker, was brought down from Wildacre and installed in our Establishment as Vice-President. We only intended her to hold the post for one year, but at the end of the year she seemed so unwilling to leave, that I took Matthew's advice and let her stay on. So she became a fixture like her pupils. It certainly paid the Establishment to retain her services, for she did more work herself than the six pupils put together, and she saw that what they did do was well done. Ladies began to give us orders again, and did not this time withdraw their custom after a first trial. I told Matthew proudly the Establishment would

pay itself before long, and become quite a commercial success. As a charity, it was successful from the beginning. The girls waxed bright and bonnie in their pretty home, and on the whole behaved beautifully.

The second year May Tompkins gave us a good deal of anxiety by starting a young man. We accidentally discovered that she constantly slipped out to meet him in the evenings, without permission. But though anxious I was not unsympathetic, and great was the rejoicing when the affair ended in a promising engagement. The excitement in the Establishment when the time of the wedding drew near was intense. It was found impossible to attend to business, so we posted up a notice on the front door stating that no orders could be executed for a fortnight, in consequence of the impending marriage of one of the hands.

The trousseau was made at home, every stitch

of it, which I thought did the Establishment great credit. Matthew gave the bride away on her wedding day, and the bride's co-workers acted as bridesmaids. I acted as the bride's mother. With my own hands I dressed the dear girl both for the ceremony and for going away, gave her a nice sum of pocket-money to spend in London during her week's honeymoon, and begged her, as she valued her life's happiness, to be ever true and faithful to her husband. The poor young thing quite broke down when she said good-bye. She clung to me as though I had been indeed her mother, and she had been leaving her childhood's home, and such heartfelt words of love and gratitude did she pour into my ears, that I glowed with joy all the evening for thinking of it. I sought no reward for all I did for these girls, but reward came unsought the day of May's wedding. For I saw she loved me, I saw they all loved me ; my house was home to them ; so

happy were they in it, it was pain to go away, even with a lover. There lay my reward.

"Never again shake your head over my Establishment," I said to Matthew, when all was over. "It is a grand success."

"Do you speak, Madam, from a commercial or a charitable point of view?" asked Matthew quietly. He was very fond of sly hits at my Establishment.

"From both," I replied with dignity. "As a business firm conducted on charitable principles, I consider the Establishment has paid quite as well as could be expected. I may be a little out of pocket by it—"

"A few hundreds or so, Madam."

"I may be a little out of pocket by it," I went on, disregarding him, "but I have at any rate succeeded in making six wretched girls happy, and that is enough success for me."

We found a poor unhappy girl, a friend of

Joanna's, to take May's place, and once more fell back into business ways. At Matthew's suggestion, I told the girls they must not consider May's conduct a precedent, and that I could allow no stealing out of doors in the evening to meet young men. But—I added this without consulting Matthew—they might be “at home” to their friends on Wednesdays and Saturdays from eight to ten o'clock. Tea and refreshments would be freely given in the recreation room, and music, games, and dancing would be allowed. I only stipulated for one thing. Each young man on first presenting himself was to state to me his name, address, and occupation. If these statements were found on inquiry to be correct and satisfactory then the young man would be given a free pass for Wednesdays and Saturdays, to be held just so long as his conduct gave me satisfaction.

Matthew shook his head as usual over this

arrangement, but the girls were overjoyed. I made the announcement to them on a Tuesday morning, and rather to my surprise three young men presented themselves the very next evening at eight o'clock. How they came to hear of my "At Homes" so quickly did not transpire. I thought it best to ask no questions, but the circumstance confirmed me in my desire to give the girls every opportunity of meeting the acquaintances they had made, openly.

The statements were found to be correct and satisfactory, and the "At Homes" went off delightfully. More young men came in by degrees, and dancing became quite a feature on Saturdays. I found it possible to play dance music: it awoke no painful memories, like the songs and sonatas of old days. To please the girls I also took up once more an almost forgotten accomplishment, and at every "At Home" gave a recitation or a reading from Shakspeare. I am not sure

that the young men always appreciated the great master, but I felt it was good for them to make acquaintance with him, and they always seemed to enjoy a little chat with me afterwards. They were nice young fellows, and constantly expressed themselves most grateful to me for my kindness. I never stayed very long in the recreation room as I did not wish to be a restraint on the young people, but both Matthew and I thought it was well for me to be with them a little, lest they should degenerate into too great a freedom. Two more engagements took place that winter. My Establishment promised to be as successful matrimonially as it had been commercially and charitably. The new girl who had succeeded May became engaged to a young draper, and Amelia Macfarlane to a young excise officer. To see Amelia engaged made me feel both old and sad. She was "the little one" who had cried in her bed and awakened Miss Skinner years ago, when

I played the ghost from Hamlet on the moonlit floor of our room. The youngest companion-of-the-bedchamber. Barely out of her teens and engaged to be married, whilst I, in my twenty-eighth year, felt I had left the happy lover time behind me for ever.

Do not think that in the midst of all this busy life I ever for a day forgot Felix. No, he was still in my thoughts night and day, only hope had completely died away. No further news of him ever came to me. For two successive springs I watched for him, thinking he might come again with the crocuses, but though every day, whilst those sweet flowers blossomed, I haunted the cemetery, there was no trace of Felix, and no crocuses were placed on Miss Skinner's grave save those I placed there.

The third spring I kept away from the grave. In my hopelessness I feared to go there lest I should break down, and lose my hard-fought-for

calm. It seemed to me also that to go there showed a will incorrect to Heaven. The course might savour of impious stubbornness. Better to stay away.

I think I schooled my spirit at that time beyond what was natural. Nature punished me for it, as she punishes all who defy her. I can scarcely define my state, but I felt as if buoyancy and keenness of life were dying away within me. Perhaps the clown's words to Helena in "All's Well," when she asks how her mother fares, explain my state more clearly than can any words of mine—"She is not well; but yet she has her health: she's very merry; but yet she is not well: but thanks be given, she's very well and wants nothing i' the world; but yet she is not well."

"I think you want a change, Madam," said Matthew one day, "you don't seem quite the thing somehow. I notice a languid look in your eyes."

"It is only that I am growing older, Matthew,

and look out at the world less keenly than I did. And the spring is tiring, though it is such a sweet season."

"Precisely, Madam. You find the spring tiring. Young people should not find the spring tiring. Will you do something to please old Matthew?"

"Yes, if it is possible."

"Take the girls for a fortnight's tour in Wales; your native land that you say you love so much."

"No, Matthew. In Wales lies my old home, the only real home I have ever known. It is bound up with memories of my mother and mother-love. I who have lost the only love that could replace hers cannot go there alone. You may not understand me, but only under happy circumstances could I revisit Wales. I am quite calm, quite resigned, Matthew, but if I went to Wales now my feet would lead me irresistibly to my old home, and if I saw my old home, my heart would break."

That was enough for Matthew. He pressed me no more to go to Wales.

During the third summer of our residence at Exbourne, one of the girls gave us great anxiety. She was a new-comer who had taken Amelia Macfarlane's place. Matthew had found her out, and we had rescued her from the worst kind of poverty, the poverty which knows not how to work and is ashamed to beg. She was on the border of starvation when Matthew heard of her, and so weak was she when she joined the Establishment, that I much feared rescue had come too late. For some time we hoped that good food, a comfortable home, and bright companionship would set her up again and restore her to health, but as the weeks went on we began to see the hope was a delusive one. The evil that had been done was too great, it was beyond our power to grapple with it.

Some alarming symptoms began to show them-

selves, and our doctor recommended she should be taken up to London for advice. The question then arose, who should take her? Never since that miserable day eight years ago had I spent even an hour in town. Twice necessity had compelled me to pass from station to station in a cab, once when going, and once when returning from the continent, but these enforced drives had been very painful to me, and had stirred up most distressing memories. I shrank from visiting London again. Yet it was impossible to send the girl alone with Matthew, her companions were too inexperienced to accompany her on such an errand, and Anne Gillotson seemed afraid of the responsibility of such a charge. After a good deal of thought I came to the conclusion I must put aside my own feelings and take her myself.

CHAPTER V.

EARLY the following week we started, the invalid and I, with Matthew in attendance. Joanna and Isabel came to see us off at the station. On the platform, whilst waiting for the train, they took me aside, and told me Lizzie Andrews, another companion-of-the-bedchamber, had just become engaged to be married, and wished me to know it before I left, but had been too upset at the thought of the parting from me the marriage would involve to be able to tell me of it herself.

“You are all leaving me one by one,” I said, feeling unaccountably depressed. “I could not wish it otherwise for your own sakes, but it will

be a little sad when all the dear old companions-of-the-bedchamber, for whom I founded the Establishment, are gone. You and Joanna will be leaving me soon, Isabel."

"Joanna and I will never leave you so long as you remain unmarried. You shall go before we go, we've taken the oath of that—Not but that we get asked, like the others," she added, bridling a little with conscious pride.

"Don't refuse a good man if you feel you can return his affection," I said, "and don't indulge in any useless hopes concerning me. I have hoped until I have grown heart-weary, but now hope is dead."

The girls looked at me almost with tears in their eyes. It was not often I spoke in so dispirited a way, but on this occasion I could not help it, though I was sorry to distress them. Then the train steamed in and we had to pack the invalid comfortably into a first-class carriage. I was about to get in myself when an elderly

lady already seated in the carriage leaned forward and stared out as though interested in someone behind me on the platform.

“Look, Rob,” she said to a boy who was with her. “There is Lord Singlehurst with his flighty shrew of a wife. How ill-tempered she looks! Poor man! I should think he repented that marriage.”

Involuntarily the girls and I turned and looked where the speaker was looking. Then I gave such a start that the girls stared at me in wonder. For not ten paces away from us was standing D’Arcy Leigh. He was very changed, and looked ill and soured, but he was unmistakably D’Arcy. By his side was a young woman, loudly dressed, and palpably painted, but handsome in a somewhat shrewish style. They were having an altercation about some missing luggage. In the midst of it he turned sulkily away from her, and then suddenly his eyes met mine. I am glad to think

now that I did not blush or flinch or move a muscle. I simply looked at him, holding my head high. He was moved by so suddenly seeing me. A deep red suffused his face, and he took an eager step forwards, as though wishful to address me. I turned and quietly entered the carriage. The elderly lady stared at me in surprise.

"Stand in front of the window, girls," I said, in so low a voice no one could hear save themselves. "Do not let him come near me."

"Who is it?" whispered the girls, mounting guard over me instantly.

I whispered back to them: "The man who lost me Felix."

The train started, but the girls forgot to take leave of me. Instead, they stared at my enemy, and never in my life have I seen girls look so fierce as they did then. Their wrath surprised me. They looked like young lionesses; their rage was almost royal. I stole one last look at

D'Arcy as the train bore me away. He was looking after me, such shame and misery in his face that though he had wrecked my life I pitied and forgave him.

We were longer in London than we had anticipated. The invalid had to undergo an operation which necessitated her going into hospital for three weeks or so. I went with her to a private hospital in Fitzroy Square, and Matthew took rooms near us, called daily for orders, and was invaluable as a Mercury.

One day, towards the end of the first week, Matthew came in looking somewhat annoyed. Isabel had written to him begging him to run down for a day to the Establishment, as some business they could not arrange demanded his attention.

"Go, certainly," I said. "I daresay they do feel lost without us, But I wish they would write less vaguely. Joanna's letter to me yesterday

was most incoherent and unsatisfactory. I like to know definitely what they are about."

He went. When he came to see me the following evening, on his return, if I had not known Matthew so well I should really have thought he had taken too much to drink. He was more incoherent than the girls' letters, and scarcely seemed to know what he was saying. Something had evidently happened.

"Matthew!" I cried, an idea suddenly striking me, "You are engaged. Don't deny it: you have become engaged to a member of my establishment. I never expected this to result from my 'At Homes.' Is it, can it be the Vice-President?"

Matthew sat down on the nearest chair, overcome and appalled by the idea. "Madam, Madam!" he exclaimed gaspingly, "my age, surely my age protects me! I never go to the concerts, I mean the 'At Homes;' I regard the Vice-President merely as a woman—"

“Quite right, so she is ; but that’s no obstacle. She is a woman, therefore may be woo’d ; she is a woman, therefore may be won.”

“Madam, I’d sooner be flayed alive than married.”

Matthew said this with such frenzied earnestness I could not but believe him.

“Well, what *has* happened?” I asked.

“Madam, I have been trying to tell you. The concert we want to get up --I mean—you see the stone-mason having left such a large family—”

“What stone-mason, and why did he leave a large family?”

“I thought I told you, Madam. He fell off a ladder in the Highcliff Road, and the concert is really necessary—I mean—the poor fellow having been killed, killed on the penny, leaving not a spot in the house—”

“Let me try to understand. He fell off a ladder, was killed on the spot and left his family penniless.

Well, of course I will help them, it was a very sad accident, but why was it necessary to send for you?"

"Well, Madam, you see this concert—"

"But what *is* this concert you keep alluding to?"

By degrees I got at the root of the matter. My girls wished to get up a concert for the benefit of the bereaved family. A clever violinist, two London singers, and an amateur, name unknown, who had a remarkable voice, could all be secured through the instrumentality of a visitor to Exbourne, who was interesting himself in the affair and whose name seemed to have escaped Matthew's memory. All that was needed was my consent, and my presence on the eventful evening. Matthew had been deputed by the girls to obtain both my consent and the promise of my presence. The date they had in view was my birthday, June 15th, a fortnight hence, the professionals fortunately being free for that evening. I gave my consent, and the required promise, rather

wondering Matthew should be so excited over the matter. I could only suppose the girls had infected him with their own excitement.

The week following Matthew again ran down to Exbourne to see how the arrangements for the concert were progressing. He returned even more flustered and incoherent than the first time. I gathered from him by degrees that the girls were all making new white dresses for the occasion. They had also sent to beg that I would as a favour to themselves get myself a very pretty new dress in London.

"White and gold, if you please, Madam," said Matthew excitedly "we think that combination the most becoming to you of any. And, please, I am instructed by the girls to say that they hope you will have it made with a long sweeping bodice and a tight-fitting train."

"My dear Maharajah! I conclude you mean a tight-fitting bodice and a long sweeping train.

Well, I should like to please the girls as they are taking such trouble over the matter so I will get myself a smart dress for the occasion."

The dress was procured from Messrs. Marshall and Snelgrove; a fine white serge sitting closely to the figure and braided on the bodice and round the edge of the sweeping skirt with a beautiful design in gold. Matthew took the most extraordinary interest in the purchase, and when the dress came home I had to put it on and exhibit myself to him in the invalid's room. Both he and the invalid were charmed with it.

"I have never seen you look more beautiful in my life," said Matthew, walking round me in most evident delight. "It is just how I should have wished you to appear. No change in you save for the better. Grown, formed, developed, more stately perhaps, but the same face, the same dear beautiful innocent face——"

"Matthew, you make me feel quite shy," I said,

half laughing for pleasure, half crying for pain at his words, so mingled were the feelings they stirred within me. For though I was glad to know I was still beautiful to look at, my looks scarcely seemed to matter much now.

I did not wish to leave my invalid for longer than was necessary, she being exceedingly weak and low, so we arranged to travel down to Exbourne by the 5.40 P.M. on the day of the concert, and to return to London early the following morning. We thought this a good arrangement, for the 5.40 would bring me to Exbourne in time to dress and dine before the concert began. Unfortunately we failed to carry out our intentions. I stopped at a florist's on our way to the station to get a little bunch of rosemary and pansies which had been ordered the previous day. For these were still the only flowers I ever wore. The florist was slow, so was our cab, and we missed the train by two or

three minutes. Never in my life have I seen Matthew so put out as he was then. He seemed beside himself with vexation.

“Never mind, Matthew,” I said, “it can’t be helped. We must telegraph an explanation to the girls and await the next train. Cheer up! It is a small cloud that lowers upon the house.”

“But, madam, the next train will not bring you in to Exbourne until 9.19. So late! And then there will be driving, and dressing, and eating;—the concert will be over, the performers may be gone! Oh, dear! Oh, dear! After all our thought and care to bring the thing to pass, and trying to do it delicately and with regard to your feelings——”

He stopped, nearly crying. I felt quite sorry for him, though at the same time it surprised me he should take the matter so much to heart, and I could not quite see how my feelings could have been affected.

“I know how we can expedite matters,” I

exclaimed, after a moment's thought. "Get my large portmanteau from the porter, it holds my white and gold dress. There is an hotel round the corner, the *Grosvenor*, I noticed it as we drove along. I'll go and change my dress there, and we'll have something to eat also, whilst waiting for our train. Then we can walk straight into the concert-room when we reach the Establishment. Never despair! Why, we shall be listening to the music by 9.30."

This suggestion cheered Matthew a little. We went to the *Grosvenor* and there I changed my dress, and had a scamper-dinner. There would have been plenty of time to take the meal more comfortably, but Matthew, watch in hand, fussed and fidgeted to so great an extent I dared not be leisurely. Just as we were starting it was discovered I had no wrap to throw over my smart dress. A chambermaid came to the rescue and kindly lent me one, but I thought Matthew

would have gone out of his mind during the little delay this occasioned.

His state of nervous excitement began to strike me as almost unnatural. It was disproportionate to the occasion. I felt puzzled. The more I thought of it, the more I felt that, throughout, Matthew had been strange about this concert. And the girls also, both Matthew and the girls had been strange. What was the meaning of all the excitement and fuss? What underlay it all?

CHAPTER VI.

BY the time we reached Exbourne I had begun to feel slightly nervous and excited myself. The lamps were lighted in the station, dusky shadows lay on the road outside, I felt strange and unlike myself as I hurried to a cab, my smart white and gold dress only partly hidden by the chambermaid's shabby cloak. My excitement increased in the most inexplicable way as we drove rapidly towards the Establishment. With trembling fingers I fastened the bunch of pansies and rosemary into the front of my dress. What a fuss they had all made about this white and gold dress! How anxious they had been I should

look well. Why had they been so anxious? Why had Matthew pronounced in so pleased a way that there was no change in me save for the better?

I looked at him as he sat by my side. He was stranger than ever. He cleared his throat incessantly, he jumped up and down on his seat, he could not keep still a moment. Every now and then he seemed as if he wished to say something to me, but, when I turned to listen, he appeared to change his mind, and not a word was forthcoming.

We came at length to the small side gate which led into the garden of the Establishment.

"Stop!" I cried to the driver, putting my head out of the window. "We'll get out here, Matthew, and walk straight up the path through the garden. It is shorter than driving round to the front."

Matthew jumped out excitedly. "I'll go on and

warn them," he cried, and disappeared down the garden-path, forgetting to pay the driver. I explained to the man that I had no money, and told him to drive round to the front; then I followed Matthew.

It was dusk, yet as I walked up the path I could see that the garden was full of blossom. The air was perfectly still, not a leaf moved, not a breath was stirring. When before had I moved like this up the garden, in the dusky night, alone, absolutely alone? Amidst the trees at the further end of the garden peeped glimpses of something white and cold and glistening. A great window, shining like a diamond. Instinctively I looked up at the sky. Yes, there it was: a star. All this had happened before. I went straight up to the great diamond window and peeped in. A long empty dark room, but as I looked, across the further end of it there flashed a light. Someone was moving with a light in

the corridor beyond. I flung the sash up, determining to enter that way. As I crossed the room, a strange sensation came over me, a sensation that yet seemed familiar, of something great and wonderful that was about to happen. Again I looked up, in my excitement half expecting to see the star standing on high in the darkness of the room. Suddenly the darkness became light. Someone had flung the door open, and Matthew's voice cried:

"Here she is; she has come in through the window."

Far down the corridor I could see Isabel and Joanna coming towards me, robed like angels in dazzling white. Though they were so far off, I could see their eyes looking joyfully at me as they advanced. Where before had I seen them looking thus joyfully at me? Was it in a dream? Soft distant music broke upon my ears. I began to tremble. It was a prelude, weird yet familiar,

wild notes heralding the approach of Orpheus from over the mountains. Far, far away, I seemed to feel, I seemed to hear him—coming.

When the girls reached me I could not speak, but mutely stood, whilst they took off my wrap, and kissed me and welcomed me, and shook out my dress and praised its beauty.

“We were terribly anxious,” said Isabel, still with that strangely joyful look in her eyes. “But it is all right now. You are in time. We have something to tell you, we want you to come with us—Oh, Joanna! What is that? They have changed the programme. He must not sing yet—not yet——”

I broke from them, trembling exceedingly, for through the thrilled air rang suddenly a high beautiful note, which dropped, dropped into a strain that had a dying fall. The voice of Orpheus coming back to me from over the mountains. The long-silent voice of Orpheus calling to me

at last, calling to me to come to him for ever. The voice I had thought I should never hear again. Oh! was it a dream? How soft, how sweet had the strain become, a murmur like that of the south wind in my ear. Oh! could it be a dream?

No, it is Orpheus, it is Orpheus himself, pleading to me to come. The voice swells louder and louder, it is calling to me, calling, calling——

Like a wild thing I rushed up the stairs to the distant room whence the voice came. The girls cried to me to come back, not to go in there where all the people were, but I took no heed of them. Not raging fires, not rushing floods could have held me back whilst that voice called. Straight on down the passage I rushed, the voice still calling, rising and falling, now lost in a tumult like that of the sea, now triumphing over it.

One supreme note like the call of a trumpet. I answered it. "Felix! Felix! I am here!" burst like a cry from my trembling lips.

Then I reached the open doorway.

Before me were rows of people, all seated, all turning to look at me, but they were but as figures in a dream. Beyond them on a raised platform at the further end of the room stood Felix. The music suddenly died away. In dead silence, we two, who had been lost to each other for years, looked across the room at one another. When our eyes met it was as though we had never been parted. I saw the old love leap swiftly into Felix's eyes, banishing surprise. All doubts, all fears fled. Before me was the friend of my childhood, the lover of my youth. Nothing that had happened, no, nor all the years of separation, had changed Felix.

The song dropped from his hand, the dear kind hand that had clasped mine in love and protection so many a year; his face quivered, and his eyes fell from my face to my bosom where nestled the blessed pansies and rosemary. The same flowers

were in his button-hole. The flowers we had chosen years ago, to be a token and a sign between us of our love for one another. Pansies to show our thoughts were bound up in each other, rosemary to show our remembrance of one another could never die.

I saw his face flush when his eyes fell upon my flowers, then swiftly he left the platform and came towards me.

At last.

The room grew dim and faint; Felix's figure instead of drawing nearer, receded and became shadowy as a spirit form. I gave a wild cry; the cry of a heart that had schooled itself and waited until it could endure no more.

"Oh, don't go away again! don't go away again!" I cried. Then everything passed away into the land of nothingness.

When I came to myself again I was lying by an open window. Overhead was a star. I

gazed dreamily at it for a moment, then I recollected that the great and wonderful thing it had portended had come to pass. I had found Felix. I was lying in his arms, his face was bending over me in the summer dusk.

"Oh, is it a dream? Say it is not a dream," I whispered.

Felix drew me more closely to him. With his heart beating against mine, I could not think it a dream.

"Such years, such long years!" I cried shudderingly. "Oh, Felix! It has been such a weary time. I know I did you a grievous wrong——"

"Hush! dearest one, hush!"

"I did you a grievous wrong, but never say that I was false of heart. From first to last, from beginning to end, I have loved only you."

"I know it, sweet one, I know it now."

"My heart has been nearly breaking——"

"Oh, hush! dearest. You are piercing mine!"

"Say you still love me?"

"I have never ceased to love you."

"And the past, oh, the past, Felix?"

"The past is over. It has vanished. Only death shall part you and me again. Everything we have longed for during the weary years shall be ours now."

"The dear little home?"

"Yes, with music, and above all, with love."

Then there was silence. The winter in my heart changed to glorious summer. Brighter than ever shone the star, the full star that ushers in the even.

A soft footstep broke the silence. Matthew was approaching us. More footsteps. Lights. Isabel and Joanna in their white dresses. Felix helped me to my feet, and hand in hand we faced the kind friends who had given us back to each other.

"Is all well?" asked Matthew anxiously.

"All is well," I answered, holding out my hand

to my devoted servant. "Matthew, the wilderness has blossomed like the rose."

My story is ended. But it may be well for the sake of the inquisitive minded to state how Felix was found and restored to me. It was all told me when the concert was over.

From the Exbourne station my girls, Isabel and Joanna, had followed D'Arcy to the *Marine Hotel*. There, in his wife's presence, they had charged him with the sin of wrecking the happiness of two lives—Remorse was evidently strong upon D'Arcy, for he pleaded guilty, and, regardless of the scoffs of his wife, begged he might be shown how to repair the wrong. Then the girls demanded of him that as he had lost me Felix so should he find him for me. D'Arcy seemed glad to do this thing, and, through Felix's lawyer, whom he knew, he found out my lost lover's address in Dresden.

Felix had spent the eight weary years abroad; five with his grandmother at Montreux, a place I had, alas! never thought of visiting, then, when she died, three more in Dresden. He believed me married. In a letter from a London friend, which he received a few months after he left England, was a passing allusion to the approaching marriage of D'Arcy Leigh with a flighty but very pretty girl, bearing the romantic name of Rosamund. Rosamund is not a common name, but strangely enough D'Arcy had found another Rosamund and married her. Felix could not but believe that I was D'Arcy's Rosamund, and it was to him as the bitter end of his love story. Only once did he return to England during those years, and that was but for a few days after the death of his grandmother. He had visited Exbourne then, a short memory-haunted painful visit, and had placed the crocuses on Miss Skinner's grave. Feeling it would be torture to

run across me, even for a moment, he fled once more to foreign soil, and tried to solace his soul with music.

Then after eight long years of weariness, came two startling letters. One was from D'Arcy Leigh, full of remorse and anxiety to make reparation. He told much Felix had not known before; in fact, he tried to exonerate me entirely. Then for the first time Felix learnt I was unmarried. The other letter was from Isabel and Joanna, asking him to return to England and sing for them at a concert at Exbourne which was to be given by old friends in his old home. They entreated him to do this, *if he still loved Rosamund*.

This strange letter from the girls had disturbed Felix almost as much as their strange conduct had disturbed me. He came. Eagerly on the eventful evening he questioned the girls, but they bade him wait and see what the evening would bring. The concert began without me—Prompted

by some indefinable feeling, Felix chose, when his turn came to sing, the song which had touched my heart so deeply years ago. The song which had brought me in love and tears to my feet. Once more he called, and I answered.

I have written my story in the invalid's chamber. Life is nearly over for her; she is passing away from us to the undiscovered country. With the shadow of death hanging thus over the house, Felix and I feel we must yet wait a little. It cannot be for long.

Afterwards he takes me to the home I have yearned for so many years. My mother home is to be my married home; the old ivied house in Wales round which the swifts used to circle in the summer evenings. Felix has bought it, and Matthew is down there now, making preparations for us. My suite of rooms in Felix's old home will be given up to the Establishment, which will in future shelter twelve girls instead of six.

The clergy have been pleased to speak very kindly of my "good work," and Felix's purse being now added to mine we feel inclined to extend the undertaking. Our old friend Anne Gillotson will still remain nominally "Vice-President," but all authority and management have already passed into her hands, in consequence of the impending marriage of the President.

Isabel and Joanna have announced to me that they are engaged, but they keep to their word, and mean to see me married before they marry themselves.

The castle on Wildacre Common is to be sold.

Matthew's life is bound up in Felix's and mine. Of him nothing further can be said, save that where we go, there also he will go.

THE END.

A YELLOW ASTER.

IN 3 VOLUMES.

By IOTA.

CHAPTER XXV.

WHEN Strange set out on his honeymoon it was with a distinct project simmering in his brain. He meditated a good three months' loiter through the byways of the Tyrol, on into Switzerland, and then home through the towns of the Netherlands, and all by routes best known to himself.

It becomes, however, a moral impossibility for a man to loiter with any comfort by the side of a new-made wife into whose very bones and marrow the spirit of unrest has crept, and so, by intangible gradations the loiter had developed into a tumultuous forging on.

Gwen seemed possessed by a very dignified and quite calm-seeming devil; he was a gentlemanly creature and made no untoward fuss or excitement, but movement he must have, he dared not rest.

In spite of herself, Gwen found growing in her from the very day of her marriage, a craving full of subdued fierceness, to be in the very middle of the hurly-burly, no matter whether it raged in a fashionable hotel or in the market-place of a country town. She had besides other uncomfortable ways. In valleys, where the sun shone and the wind rested, and where ordinary mortals were bathed in a soft entrancement of delight, she seemed to lose half her life.

On the contrary, she lived, her voice regained its timbre, her eyes shone, her mouth laughed, her very hair sparkled with vitality, as soon as ever she got high on a mountain, the bleaker and harsher the better.

One day they had climbed to the top of the D'Auburg, a dour looking mountain in the Tyrol generally avoided by tourists, but for some reason Gwen took it into her head to ascend it.

She now sat glowing and tingling with radiant health, leaning up against a rock that sheltered her from the blast that was screeching across the ledge of the mountain. She looked as cool, and as beautiful and unruffled, as if she had just dropped from the clouds, instead of climbing up to them by a most villainous path.

There was always a sort of exotic splendour about her and yet she never seemed out of place.

“Are you never tired?” said her husband, as he was pouring some wine into a little silver cup.

“Never! I don’t remember ever once having been tired.”

“Looked at from the carnal mind of a chaperon, that was rather a nuisance, wasn’t it?”

“It was; Lady Mary suffered a good deal from it. I used to try to accommodate myself to her in this matter and to look tired, but I never could manage it.”

“Have another sandwich?”

She went on in a reflective way as she ate it,

“It is a wretched thing generally, for a woman to be absolutely untireable; a very strong woman is docked of half the privileges of her sex. If you notice the stock devoted husband, he has always a sickly creature of a wife to devote himself to—or one that poses as sickly—or if her body isn’t sickly, her brain is. You hardly ever find a woman quite sound in wind and limb and intellect, with an absolutely unselfish husband, ready to think all things for her and to dance attendance on her to all eternity. Helplessness is such supreme flattery.

I tell you, the modern man doesn't like intellect any more than his fathers before him did, if it comes home too much to him."

"No!—Sickliness and softness of brain don't, however, appeal equally to all men."

"I suppose not, but the things they carry in their train do, the parasitical gracious leaning ways, the touch of pathos and pleading,—those are the things I should look for if I were a man,—they charm me infinitely. Then that lovely craving for sympathy and that delicious feeling of insecurity they float in, which makes the touch of strong hands a Heaven-sent boon to them—those women, you see, strew incense in your path and they get it back in service. When one hears of a devoted couple and is called on to admire with bated breath, I never can till I have dug out the reason of this devotion. I hate sticking up people on pinnales and then having to knock them down like a pair of nine pins."

"Hero worship isn't your tap evidently, but if one makes a principle of never smelling a flower or eating fruit until one has ascertained the manure used in its growth, one gets put off a lot. By the way, I haven't noticed any marked symptoms of mental or physical decay in you, and yet, God knows and can possibly

score up the number of your lovers—they certainly were beyond all human computation.”

She flashed a quick untranslatable look at him and smiled.

“My lovers? They weren’t lovers at all, they were explorers, experimental philosophers, they had the same strong yearning for me that a botanist has for a blue chrysanthemum or a yellow aster—if a man could succeed in getting this thing he would go mad over it and put it in the best house in his grounds for all his neighbours and friends to admire, but do you think he would love it like an ordinary sweet red rose that he can gather, and smell, and caress and bury his nose in and wear near his heart? Not he!

“Do you think one of these men ever wanted to touch me,” she went on calmly, taking little sips of wine, “or to ruffle the hair round my forehead, which is their invariable habit in novels, or to lay his hand on my bare shoulder—they do that, too, I have read—or to clasp me to his breast, the climax to these pretty little customs of theirs? Goodness! And imagine my feelings if one had! But they didn’t even want to; and yet they were my slaves, to do with precisely as I liked.

"When I was in the thick of it I thought I could not live without all this, yet it was disappointing on the whole, I believe. I remember wishing now and then that I could flirt like other girls and make men make palpable fools of themselves for my sake. It looks such a very delightful pastime! I have seen plain girls look positively quite beautiful when engaged in it. The under-current of heaps of girls lives, upon which it seems to me all the rest is built up, is a sort of simmering, unconfessed, vague longing for the sensation of being 'caught and kissed' like the little brown maid in the old rhyme; not in a general vulgar way, but in a well-bred particular way. It is a quite incomprehensible sensation to me."

"Probably. It's natural all the same," he said, looking at her eyes which regarded him curiously, "and Nature is such a vindictive grasping beast it is as well not to run counter to her, or she will have limb for limb."

"I wonder what limb of mine she will want?"

"Oh, you? she'll trip you up in your own coils somehow! Fill you with an overpowering desire to be 'caught and kissed'," he said with a short laugh, "and have no one handy to do it."

"Oh, then she must make me over again!"

She stood up and looked down over the gloomy valley.

"What is it to be natural, I wonder? I don't know."

"Time will tell you all about it. Now you want to be down over that precipice. Well, anyway, I am glad you are warranted sound, come on, my yellow aster."

They were past the precipice, far down the other side when Gwen spoke again.

"Humphrey," she said, with a stronger trace of emotion in her voice than he had ever detected there before, "upon my word, I often wish for your sake I was just a good common, frowsy, red cabbage-rose."

"Ah, do you?—Well, '*die Zeit bringt Rosen!*'"

CHAPTER XXVI.

ABOUT a week later they arrived in Paris. Gwen had never been there before, and her curiosity to see everything was insatiable and unresting.

She often seemed to herself as if she were caught in the whirl of a mad intoxicating race with fate; it was glorious; it stimulated her like a draught of wine; it filled her veins with fire; it was as if the spirit of the world had got into her spirit and shot streams of the strength of immortality through all her being.

She was as a god to herself and fate was as a thing of naught. This was in her times of exaltation however, but even in these early days there came moments of reaction in their due season. Fortunately she knew the symptoms of their approach, and could hide herself away from her husband's eyes. Her room could tell strange tales whenever Gwen shut

herself in and threw up the sponge till the next round.

Then there came shame into that proud face, fear into those fearless eyes, a stoop into those stoopless shoulders, she neither ranted nor raved, she dared not; if she had once raised her voice, she knew quite well she must shriek and howl forth the terror and disgust and dismay with which the possible ending to this race with fate filled her.

Sometimes she would pull off her shoes and stockings and go barefooted to and fro the length of the long polished floor with its strips of Eastern carpet,—the cool slippery surface soothed the fever of her flying feet,—invariably she would pull off her guard and wedding ring and lay them with curious gentle wistfulness down on the table. Once when she did this, she drew a deep breath, threw out her arms and laughed.

“I am free, free!” she cried, “my body is my own again, and my soul, and my brain! I am myself again, Gwen Waring, a self-respecting creature—with no man’s brand on me—”

In a few minutes she came back and looked at the golden bands.

“What is the use of lying?” she said, “that mends nothing and only degrades me. I am

not free, whatever happens, whatever could possibly happen, I shall never any more be what I was! Good God! And yet women take marriage as they do a box at the Opera!"

But it was not in the strong nature of her, wholesome what there was of it awake, to lose courage often and her powers of recuperation were superb. In half an hour after she was striding wildly through the room, she came down as unruffled and more untranslatable than ever to propose some expedition.

Strange looked at his watch. "Too late for that, suppose we go and see Brydon?"

"Oh, yes, let us go," she said eagerly.

He looked at her and knew all about it.

For a minute he felt an overmastering desire to shake her and make her eyes speak plain English, he was getting tired of their hieroglyphics. He was buttoning her glove at the time and involuntarily he gave the button a cross twist and twitched it out.

"Oh, hang it, is the glove rotten or are my methods? Will it matter?" he asked.

"Oh, not at all, my sleeve will cover it."

It was a diabolical lottery altogether, and the soul of the man groaned within him, it was even worse than he had anticipated in the first hot glamour of love, he freely con-

fessed this, but he had sworn to himself in his foolish raptures that he would face hell for the girl, and he was not the man to eat his words.

They walked to Brydon's.

Gwen took a great delight in going in and out among the streets, and a shame-faced pleasure in listening to her husband's stories, to every twist and turning in them.

"There is no one like him for a companion!" she often confessed to herself angrily, "no one I know that comes near him. What made me marry him, what? Even this part of him I can't accept and enjoy without disgust and self-loathing!"

At last they got to the little street that Brydon lived in and climbed to the fourth flat of a tall house.

When Brydon saw Strange he reddened with delight, but when he was presented to Gwen, he paled suddenly and his eyes fell.

"You could have knocked me down with a feather!" he explained afterwards to his chosen comrade.

It was a superb compliment to her, and her husband laughed as he saw it. And then a queer wonder took hold of him as to the sort of ending this good humoured half-impersonal

pride he took in her conquests would have, then this evolved another wonder which dealt with the birth of a strong woman's passion.

Strange pulled himself up and thrust this out of his mind with a rough shove.

"On the whole, what's the result, so far, Charlie?" he asked when that young man had established his wife in a big cane chair, softening the light from one side and strengthening it from another in a lingering absorbed way, as with half-closed eyes he furtively drank in the fulness of her beauty.

The question stripped the glamour from him at a rush, he flopped limply down on to a seat.

"If only you hadn't asked that question for three more months, but now, now it is cruel! Just imagine a fellow free all his life to ride his own nag, a sorry jade it might be, but anyway fit enough for him, and his own; just fancy him strapped on to a small donkey belonging to another fellow, that it would be more than his life was worth to prod into a gallop and to have to peg along on this beast week in, week out, along the same old road. Oh, Lord! the grind, it's awful, awful, digging one's heels into that confounded ass—Oh!—"

He jumped up with a guilty start. "Lady Strange, I beg your pardon, I forget what ladies are like, and Strange is such a comfortable fellow to growl to, bad language slips out before one can catch it, at the very sight of him."

"Don't apologize to me, especially if my husband is the cause of your offence," said Gwen kindly.

She had a fancy to be kind to this boy. If she had confessed it to herself, it was with a distinct view of getting to know a side of her husband that Brydon knew all about and she nothing. She was making a study of him in spite of herself and liked to collect evidence.

Meantime Strange had been looking carefully through some of Brydon's sketches scattered everywhere.

"You'll draw as well as you colour, old man, and that is more than I ever expected of you. What does Legrun say?"

"He says he'll say nothing until I have unlearned every cursed mannerism I have picked up in England, that den of bad taste. Then '*peut-être*—who knows?'

"But the fellow rages just as much against his own rapid methods as he does against those we've been born and bred in. How dare

we think to get an effect with a few strokes like he does, he, who has worked, *parbleu!* who has sweated, who has prayed, who has blasphemed, who has torn the heart out of his body to arrive at this ease, this divine confidence—‘the head of us should be punched’—he is great in English. We must take twenty strokes to one of his; we must do with pain, with tears, what is but ‘*delices*’ to him—details—we must know them as the ‘*bon Dieu*’ knows them, before we venture to omit or even to suggest one; then he ups and splutters out some delicious blasphemy on some unwary youth’s head.

“Look at me, the ghost of a creature stalking mournfully on eggs, with furtive fear in all my lineaments. And this is an artist’s training! Good Lord, when I remember how I sat in that garret in Bland Street and thought of fame, and of myself in a new suit, dancing a war-dance before my masterpiece on the line, with duchesses squabbling for the first shake of my hand!—Lady Strange, I am going to make some tea.”

“I wish you would,” said Gwen laughing, “we walked, and I am so thirsty.”

“Hu!” said Brydon examining his milk-jug, when he had filled his kettle and set it on

the little charcoal stove, "every drop gone! I won't be two minutes. The old lady on the first flat and I are affinities to a certain extent; in return for sundry packets of English tea, she keeps me in milk at odd times. Strange, will you shepherd the kettle?"

"I wonder if his cups are clean," said Strange, rummaging them out of a cupboard over the stove, "look, an inch thick with dust, and the handles! That fellow moons too much to be very cleanly, look at the tea-cloth, Lord! Have you a clean handkerchief, Gwen?"

Gwen's brow contracted slightly. She was a dainty person and unpractical, and teacups in connection with handkerchiefs gave her an uncomfortable feeling of impropriety.

She gave him a handkerchief however, with a small gasp of disgust, and watched his doings with a faint half-scornful interest.

"How particular you are!" she said, "I had no idea you could trouble yourself about such things."

"I can't stand dirt in man or beast."

"How did you stand travelling—in Algeria, for example?"

"Ah there—there were compensations, the game was worth the candle, but if civilization has produced nothing better—give the devil

his due—it has produced clean skins and clean eating. I fancy I was originally designed for an inspector of nuisances,” he continued running Gwen’s lovely morsel of cambric on the end of a pointed stick in and out the handle of a cup.

Gwen noticed with some wonder the curiously delicate way in which he did it. “The thing would have smashed long ago in any other man’s hand,” she thought, “he treats women like that, he is very gentle, but he is the master, he holds them in his hand and does as he likes with them. And—I have no doubt whatever, that there are at this minute hundreds of women who would like it. Why doesn’t that handle break and cut him—there is no legal bond between them.” This struck her grim sense of humour and she had to bite her lips to keep in a wild laugh.

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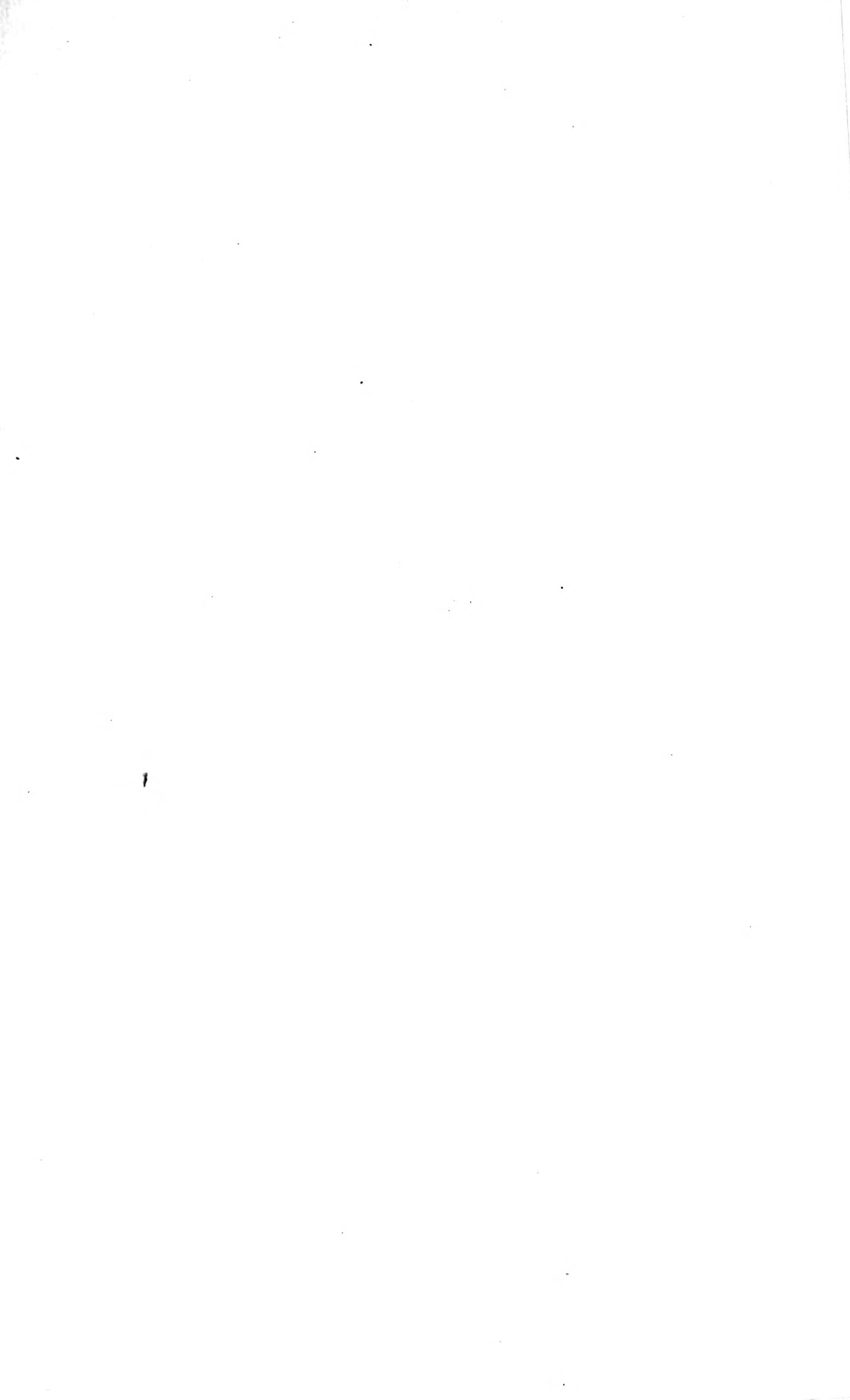
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